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A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

Inculturating Theological Thinking

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Editorial

The Church in Asia is today in a Catch-22 situation, caught between the neo-colonialism of the West and the Hindutva doctrine of RSS. What unites these groups is adherence to an outdated Graeco-Roman methodology. In order to get out of this situation, the Indian people, especially theologians, have to re-examine their methodology of theological thinking.

The document of the Roman Synod *Ecclesia in Asia* which some describe as "the Magna Carta for the evangelization of Asia in the Third Millennium", begins by expressing the hope that "just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted in the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent" (EA, 1). It goes on to declare that the Synod of Bishops for Asia was part of a programme centred on the challenges of the new evangelization" (EA, 2). It is clearly a programme of conquest like the past missionary enterprises of the European colonial powers and hence finds its main challenge in the existence of other ancient local cultures and religious systems like Buddhism and Hinduism that have a clearly soteriological character (*Ibid*). There is no doubt that this is a document written for Asia by the Europeans in the spirit of the past "Modern Period" of European thought with emphasis on technological reason, profit motive and the idea of an unstoppable progress towards a global system. On the other hand, for the Asian Christians the other religions, with whom they are in continuous dialogue, present dimensions of their own faith, are part of the one divine economy of human salvation, and do not constitute a challenge.

Equally based on the Western methodology of conquest is the Hindutva project of the RSS and its allies to re-convert by force all those converted to Christianity and to prohibit all future conversions. Its signs no one can mistake: priests are killed, churches are burned, religious sisters are raped as part of a conspiracy to desecrate, humiliate and trivialize whatever is sacred in another's religious faith! When Sankaracharya of Puri declares all conversions after independence invalid, he is denying the spirit of mutual tolerance and freedom of conscience of each one to follow the religion of his choice with which our Indian independence was secured. It is the same objective approach to the world as something to be conquered and subjugated by power. Mr. Guy Sorman, the French scholar who recently published the book *The Genius of India* says: "If one accepts that the history of India is made up of different strata of experience which amalgamate

to give us this multicultural, tolerant India, Hindutva appears to be a recent aberration,. like a copy of European movement with a single virile God, a single unified nation ... Those who invented Hindutva were very westernised. So Hindutva is westernised and goes contrary to the genius of India." (*The Hindu*, April 18, 2000 p. 12, col.).

If we look at our faith from the perspective of the early Church before the 27 books of the New Testament were written, before the Greek way of thinking was applied to interpret the Christ event, before all those ecumenical councils which were only steps in the progressive westernization of the Church, we can see that such conflicts did not exist. Vision was unified in the Risen Jesus symbolizing the one divine plan of salvation for all God's children. Jesus himself introduced a new methodology. Instead of continuing the old Judaic approach to religious life as a sort of contract of a subjugated people to a benevolent conqueror, his New Covenant asks us to stand before God in a sense of freedom and dignity as sons and daughters before their loving Father. Paul tells people that all have the law of God written in their hearts and yet instructs them about the new order of salvation established in Christ. There is no contradiction between Christianity and other religions. Though they are all part of the one religious history of humanity and the common heritage of all, since they come at different moments and different situations in history they are dimensions of each other. This means one has to study religion in its cultural context. One cannot preach Christianity to the Indian people unless one is willing to get out of the straight jacket of western thinking and inculturate one's theological thought in the present day Indian context. So we are devoting this issue of *Jeevadhara* to the question of inculturating our theological thinking.

My article on "Inculturating Theological Thinking" is a survey of the past history of inculturation of Christian theological thought and a brief indication of what can be done at present to make Christianity intelligible to our partners in dialogue.. Dr.Gaston CMI examines two radically different styles of theological thinking, the epistemological approach of Thomas Aquinas and the realization method of Sankara. Fr. Chacko Valiyaveetil S.J. discusses the general approach to other religions, while Frs. V. Johnson C.M.I. and Dhanaraj S.J. explore the dynamics of Tribal and Tamil religious thinking respectively.

We have also revived the favourite "Discussion Forum" which can further theological research and inculturation.

Inculturating Our Theological Thinking

John B. Chethimattam

This article contains both a brief history of inculturation of Christian theological thinking in the past and an indication of what it should be in the present. The basic problem with Christianity today is that it is expressed in Greek thought and most of the controversial issues come from that. But the Gospel was proclaimed not as an ideology. It was dynamically proclaimed and actualised in differing socio-cultural contexts. As Julius Cardinal Dharmaatmadja has said, the Church in Asia should take on the "face of Asia" so that it is "specifically characterising Asia" and "at the same time becomes the more meaningful for Asian society, particularly for the poor and under-privileged". With respect to other religions, "the local churches should be capable of seeing the religious values and culture they embody". "The new way the Church bears itself will enable these people to understand us better, and to come closer to us, but also enrich us in return in the way we live our Christian lives."

When in November 1999 Pope John Paul II came to New Delhi to release the Roman Synodal document "Church in Asia", the word 'inculturation' was frequently used by different speakers, but in radically different meanings. For some it was obviously a mere strategy to make Christianity look less offensive to Asians. It was meant mostly as inter-culturation, confrontation between different religions set in radically different cultural frameworks, each one believing itself culturally superior to others and trying its best to make itself understood by them. For yet others inculturation is limited to stating one's religious doctrine in the categories and symbols of the other. But Cardinal Darmaatmadja the President Delegate of the Synod for Asia making the closing remarks at Delhi stated: "Being Church in Asia today means participating in the mission of Christ the Saviour in rendering his redemptive love and service in Asia, so that Asian men and women can more fully achieve their integral human development ... bringing the good News into all dimensions of human life and society and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it anew." Here rarely is an effort made to step into the cultural shoes of the other and walk with him up the religious path. Right from the beginning of the Axial Period between 900 and 200 BCE when logic and metaphysics emerged, religions drifted apart, on the basis of their differing perceptions of the Deity. What separated them was mostly the confusion regarding the questions they asked and the pattern of thinking they followed to resolve the issues.

This temptation to escape from the real conflicts of life into an abstract world of logical consistency of our mental images or a transcendental field of metaphysical statements was a threat to religions both in the West and the East. While the Graeco-Romans escaped into an abstract field of being, truth and goodness, the Eastern world took refuge in pure consciousness conceived as light shining by itself or as pure emptiness. Actually Christianity came to reverse the trend and to shift the emphasis from an ontology of God and his nature to an anthropology of his Kingdom and his rule in the lives of the poor and the oppressed. Subsequently Greek philosophy did to a certain extent take over and re-direct the inquiry into the ontology of God even as a rational justification for a life of faith. But the New Testament writings resisted the temptation and inculturated the Gospel message in the concrete situations they encountered. They did not attempt an ideological presentation of Christ and his teachings but only faced the actual socio-cultural situation in the light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Today once again the world has become fed up with long centuries of debate about God and his nature and has shifted the emphasis from a divine ontology to an anthropology that tackles human suffering in the light of faith in God. After all, the basic problem that interests humanity at large today is not mere bafflement at the phenomena of nature, nor the question of the fight between the good God and the prince of darkness, but rather the suffering of humans. Religions of India started with this crucial issue of human suffering and its causes, but soon abstract thinking took over and directed their attention to an analysis of the different levels of human consciousness. What is needed is to go back to the concrete cultural contexts in which religious faith found its actualization in the different cultures. They show us the different paths through which to make the one divine plan of salvation relevant to our actual situation going beyond the polarities of East and West.

I. The Problem

The fact is that to many in India Christianity still looks a foreign religion, dressed in Western metaphysics, sciences of sociology, anthropology and psychology not responding to the actual concerns and aspirations of the Indian people. Some are afraid of the very word 'interfaith'. Since people of different faiths actually live together and work together, as a recent statement for youth declares, "faiths are naturally integrated and no special word is needed. Perhaps by naming it we might lose it or make it too self-conscious. As a matter of fact, the word 'interfaith' sometimes keeps friends at a distance because their parents suspect some kind of proselytizing. Others have scars from colonial religions and now are cautious lest a kind of colonial

interfaith movement develop.”¹ So there are some who think that “any language that smacks of exclusive claims or absolutising statements” should be avoided. For them Christian exclusive expressions like “fullness of revelation”, ‘fulfilment of religion’ and ‘the only way’ are suspect as expressions of subjective faith.² But this would deny the very individuality and specificity of different religions and would deny religious pluralism itself. Religions are not all saying the same thing; they have their exclusive claims which are not necessarily contradictory of the faiths of other religions. Religions are part of the common history of humanity and appearing at crucial moments in history they have made their unique contributions..

But the answer to this is not simply to “transcend the sociological”, ignore the differences among religious traditions and enter into a sort of “intra-religious dialogue” R. Panikkar says: “This then is the intra-religious dialogue, wherein investigation becomes a form of prayer. We question ourselves on the meaning and purpose of life; we venture closer to those experiences at the very heart of the various traditions.” Here the walls of the microdoxies will fall, and with what will remain “we build a new - not a fortified chamber but a dwelling open to communication with the real on all sides.”³ Religion, however, is not for personal meditation alone, but has also real sociological relevance. Thus there is a world of difference between the Upanishadic religion that aims at *atmasakshatkara*, *God-realization*, and the Christian Gospel which is a call to establish God’s rule and kingdom in the lives of human beings and in the world as a whole... The Upanishads through various *vidyas* start from any experience, of what is seen or heard, speech, Om, an *istadevata* or the *mahavakyas* of Scripture, or even the tip of one’s nose or belly-button, and try to rise to the realization of the Atman, the One-alone-without-a-second, residing in the cave of every heart. The Gospels, on the other hand, present Jesus crucified and risen from the dead. He calls all to be his disciples and directs their attention not to an impersonal God, but on the one hand to the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and on the other, to human beings who are, by the one Son, enabled to become sons and daughters of the Father in heaven. Religious pluralism is a fact, and it cannot be eliminated by wishful thinking.. The different religions appeared at different moments in history and addressed all human

1. *The Newsletter of the International Interfaith Centre*, Oxford, no. 12, Jan. 2000, p. I
2. Report of the Colloquium of Bishops and Theologians, Bangalore, 14-17, March 2000.
3. R. Panikkar, *The Intra-religious Dialogue*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1984, P. I 0

beings with their distinctive messages relevant to their ages. Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Mohammed and their respective religions are all part of the one history of humanity. They do not all say the same thing, nor do they necessarily contradict each other. But their respective relevance to all human beings can be brought out only if they meet in the same aesthetic continuum of culture.

But the basic problem with Christianity today is that it is bound up with and expressed in traditional Western thinking. This is Greek thinking, which is basically Plato and a series of footnotes to Plato. Its fundamental difficulty is the unproved and unprovable absolute principles that are assumed as the starting point of all thinking. It is a philosophy which deals only with essences. About the concrete it has no intellectual knowledge except by reducing it to some abstract essence. So there are the principles of identity and non-contradiction, which state that something has to be itself and not anything else. This is a principle of staticity and ignores the dynamic character of all reality that is in constant evolution. Then there is the principle of sufficient reason, which postulates that for something to be intelligible it should be possible to be reduced to its constitutive principles. This again by itself leads nowhere, since the sufficient reason for anything is itself. Five calories of energy needs only five grams of matter to explain it, and not anything more. A finite thing can never postulate an infinite thing for its reason except through the logic of an essence which by itself does not imply any limitation. Similarly the principle of causality which says that every effect should have a cause, cannot prove the existence of any cause which exceeds the effect.

It can be easily shown that most of the controversial issues in our presentday theology come from the suppositions of this philosophy based on an essentialist understanding of the world of reality. The whole Greek moral system was based not on any personal commitment to God, Creator and final goal of all beings, but on the *idea* of the Good, in which all things participated to which all things move as their final goal and in which they find their perfect happiness. It is on such a supposition of "the existence of one valid truth for all" that Cardinal Ratzinger condemns "a liberal society a relativist society". "Liberation Theology a purely political movement which cannot bring spiritual salvation, and a pluralist theology of religions a denial of "the binding and valid truth in history"⁴. This absolute truth that is

4 Cardinal Ratzinger, "Relativism: The Central Problem for Faith Today", *Origins*, October 31, 1996, vol.26, No.20, pp.311-316

assumed to be equally intelligible to all is for him the bed-rock of all religion and ethics! So democracy that is tolerant of all positions and opinions is incompatible with an obligatory moral system! Similarly for him ecology which considers man in his concrete world situation would not be relevant to the salvation of his soul⁵. The problem with this approach is that we are dealing with our idea of things than with reality itself. Any amount of our ideas about God will not be God, and our conformity with any idea will not make truth, since by itself it has nothing to do with reality as such. That is why, Aristotle holds that in most ethical questions we can have no absolute certainty, but only moral certainty. The basis for this, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, is the faith in a personal God who created and ordered all things, belief that humans created in the divine image that includes a rational nature, are able to know truth even in a limited yet real way, and that God has endowed us with free will, giving us the real ability to choose good and evil, for which we can rightly be held accountable.

In the same way John Hicks thinks that religions can best be compared and evaluated only from a theocentric perspective, because for him religion is the search for the Supreme Being. He calls this a Copernican shift in theology from Christ, who is a concrete historical person, to God as the centre. Here again the supposition is that God is an absolute Idea, in the light of which all gods and saviours have to be judged. But christocentrism is based on our immediate encounter with the concrete individual Jesus of Nazareth who is the one Son of God, the Way, the Truth and the Life. God's work of human salvation including the Incarnation is not a change in God, but something happening on the side of humanity, especially in the human Jesus. He has no self of his own except that of the Logos, and he is sanctified by the Spirit. Even though we cannot fully recover the "Jesus of history", namely go back in history and find out all that actually happened to him, the one we now encounter, the glorified Jesus sitting on the right hand of the Father, is the "historical Jesus", the one who came through suffering and death to the resurrection. In the flesh of Jesus humans encounter the one who is the Son of God. Actually this was the only way God could reveal himself apart from his interventions in human history. All the theophanies and images people formed about God were not God. About Jesus, on the other hand, people could say "This man, the one who is really here, is the Son of God". But his human consciousness was limited by time, space and culture. One cannot say that the teaching he provided was the best ever possible. Though in Person he was God, all the information he provided

about God was not God, nor did it make religious information provided by other religions irrelevant. Through him to examine the contributions of other religions is not to deny or diminish their uniqueness and importance, but rather to highlight the special aspects of human existence they emphasized at particular moments in the one religious history of humanity, in the one divine plan of salvation for all God's children.

The same essentialist philosophy creates confusion about the uniqueness of Christ. According to Knitter⁶ many presentday theologians like Panikkar, M. Amaladoss, Felix Wilfred, Leonard Swindle, S.J. Samartha and even E. Schillebeeckx "do not insist that Jesus is absolute and final. He is only universal and decisive." There are two different questions involved here. One is the question of the Incarnation, the definitive entry of the creative Logos into creation in order to lead it to its final goal. This is a historical event, not happening by any modification in the Logos, but a time-bound happening, on the side of creation, and yet definitive and unrepeatable. The other is the new information concerning the inner life of God and about God's plan to save all human beings, communicated to human beings through the human consciousness of Jesus..

With regard to the first question a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding is created when one devalues history. Raimundo Panikkar says: "It is precisely because I take seriously Christ's affirmation that he is the way, the truth and the life that I cannot reduce his significance only to historical Christianity."⁷ At the root of the de-valuing of history is the idea of religion itself. Panikkar, Knitter and others define religion as the quest for the absolute and infinite truth. Panikkar argues that the Logos could be only partially revealed by historical Jesus. For him it is debatable whether Christ is the Jewish Messiah. Then "a preached Christ within the universe of discourse of the greek orthodox world view or the latin modern vision of reality" has no relevance for Asians!⁸ So faith has to be de-kerygmaticized, namely, it cannot be given any content regarding the redemptive value of Christ's death and resurrection! Its goal is realization of the divinity. The message cannot be identified with the reality that religion aims at disclosing. Again, "I personally cannot subscribe to an opinion which monopolizes

6. Knitter, "Key Questions for a Theology of Religions", *Horizons* 1(1990)92-102

7. R. Panikkar, "The Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical Self-Examination, *Harvard Theological Review*, LXVI (1973) pp. 113-140

8. R. Panikkar, "Nine Sutra on the Asian Christ", *Jeevadhara*, No. 177 (May 2000), p.331

God, the Logos, Christ, and Jesus and sets the rules of how the Kingdom of God has to work.”⁹ The theory Panikkar holds consistently from his first book to the most recent writings is: “in Christian parlance Christ is active and present in Hinduism, although hidden and unknown. That which gives Hinduism its saving power is precisely that which Christians call Christ”. The Logos is the Iswara or Saguna-Brahma of Hinduism! He does not seem to attend to the radical difference here between Hinduism and Christianity: For Hinduism the Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman are really identical; only from the *avidya* (unreal) perspective of creation is Brahman ‘saguna’, while for Christianity Father and Son though identical in divine nature are distinct as persons. Jesus is identical with the person of the Son.. With regard to the Incarnation, there can be change and newness not from the part of God but only from the side of creation. Here humanity’s encounter with God in the divine Person of Jesus in his birth, life, death and resurrection is undoubtedly unique and unrepeatable. That marked the definitive entry of the creative Logos into human history and the one redemptive sacrifice through which humanity as a whole was restored to friendship with God. There cannot be many incarnations, nor can humanity as a whole be twice “redeemed”. This is the basic content of the Christian ‘kerygma’..

When one comes to the second question it is about Jesus’ teachings reported to us by the many New Testament writers each of whom had a theology to support, and generations of ecclesial tradition, which addressed different historical contexts. Here the question of absoluteness or uniqueness does not arise. Though the essential message of Christianity centred in the death and glorification of Jesus remained the core, there was not a single ‘doctrine’ that remained unchanged in the history of the Church. Nor can we say about a single verse of the New Testament that this is exactly what Jesus said. Equally irrelevant is the opinion that since the human Jesus is finite and his consciousness, which is truly human also limited, he is only one expression of the divine Logos among many other equally valid expressions. The scope of the Incarnation is not to disclose information about the Logos. After all, the divinity of the Logos is the same as that of the Father and of the Spirit; it cannot be revealed piecemeal by any number of created expressions. What is being accomplished by the preaching of the Gospel by the Apostles and through the many New Testament writings is to actualize the Gospel in the given situations. There are ever so many modes of this actualization, each of which is decisive for the context and has also a certain universal significance.

9 Ibid p. 122

A similar concept of 'religion' applied univocally to different religions creates real problems in inter-religious dialogue. *Ecclesia in Asia* notes that proclaiming Jesus as the only Saviour can present particular difficulties in Asian cultures given that many Asian religions teach divine self-manifestation as mediating salvation (#10). This is a distortion of Asian religions. They are "realization" religions and not "mediation" religions. They all hold that one's ultimate reality is not something to be effected and achieved from the outside, but something already present, only to be realized. So Buddha, the Avatars of Vishnu and other religious figures are not mediators but only pointers directing one's attention to one's own authentic reality. Neither is the Guru of Sikhism or Mohammed of Islam a mediator. Christianity, on the other hand, holds that though humans are created in the image and likeness of God, they can be led to the fulfillment of their natures only by the Creative Logos, namely the Son who makes them sons and daughters in the one Son. Fr. Michael Amaladoss states: "Christians in Asia, without denying that God reveals and gives himself in Christ, have reason to believe, because of their experience of people of other religions and the fruits of the Spirit manifest in their lives, that God has also revealed and given Godself to other peoples through other mediators in other religions."¹⁰ To say the least this is superimposing the Christian redemptive idea of salvation on other religions, who think of salvation as a realization and proper understanding of what one already is than as a gift from outside. Such interpretation of other religions, however, is proposed as a reason "to interpret our faith tradition and to revise our formulation"¹¹

Similarly behind the reasoning of George Lyndbeck and others that any religion can be understood only by its initiates is the Greek supposition that there is no rational knowledge of the concrete. According to them religion as a matter of concrete and sentimental faith cannot be universalized. So for Christians to say that it is through Christ that people of other faiths also are saved would be colonialism since it is projecting their concrete experience on others. On the other hand, all faith is an encounter not with a universal idea but with a person, God. All theology is to make clear the meaning and content of that encounter both to ourselves and others. As Jurgen Habermas argues, all language is communicative, and even the most concrete experience can be in a certain sense communicated. Even the unique inner experience of the jungle man or the Rishi is communicated through words and gestures

10 Michael Amaladoss, "The Image of Jesus in the Church in Asia", *Jeevadhara*, No. 177 (May 2000) p. 288

11 Michael Amaladoss, *Ibid*, p.284

which help the listener to have the same experience in himself. What is actually needed is to examine how Christianity inculturated itself to the thinking and concerns of the peoples of the first century to which it was communicated. Though born in the Palestianian context of Judaism it soon abandoned its presuppositions. Israel's concept of divine Covenant was very much on lines of the benevolent treaty a conquering monarch entered into with the subjugated people. So loyalty to the covenant was the principal emphasis. But the Messianic secret that the Saviour had to enter his glory through suffering and death radically changed the structure of the "New Covenant". If the attitude of the observant Jew was that of a vassal before the feudal Lord, in the New Testament the attitude is of the Son before the Father complaining of the treatment of the Father: "My God, my God why has thou abandoned me?" "If it is possible let this chalice pass by me, but not my will but thy will be done!"

II. Patterns of Inculturation in the New Testament

The gospel is proclaimed in diverse ways as clearly indicated by the twenty seven documents that constitute the New Testament.. The Ecumenical Councils defined it in forms of creeds to specify the content of Christian faith and to exclude heresies and aberrations. Catechisms were actually elaborations of these creeds to instruct the future generations regarding what they have received by tradition. Theologians present it systematically in an intelligible framework of a doctrinal system. These theologies brought Christianity to the level of a world religion to content with other competing religious systems. But if we go to the origins in the first century, the kingdom of God broke into history through the live-intervention of Jesus Christ, Son of God, who declared the inauguration of God's rule and kingdom inviting all to repentance and a new life. The Apostles who received the message from Jesus and had a direct encounter with the Risen Lord took his message to different parts of the world to concrete situations of life. When this message was committed to writing it was not in the form of a systematic treatise but as presentation of the Christ event to actual contexts. The gospel was not proclaimed as an ideology nor as a programme of action. The Word of God, Jesus Christ, was dynamically proclaimed and actualized in differing socio-cultural contexts. That is why the early church had in its New Testament canon twenty seven documents, including four gospels..

Since the Word of God was addressed in history to specific cultural situations, one has to understand the Given that is proclaimed and the situation into which that Given is to be proclaimed. Actually this is what the incarnation is all about, to make the Word, which in the primary sense of the

New Testament was Jesus, become real within the realities of the world and of nations. This situation was in no way uniform. Church leaders like St. Paul urge people to unity: "By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I appeal to all of you, my brothers, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you" (1 Cor.1:10). Similarly in the Gospel of John Jesus prays for unity among his disciples and among those who are to believe in him through their preaching (Jn 1:22-23). There was clear emphasis on charity and a directive against all kinds of dissensions and rivalries. But unity was not uniformity nor rigid homogeneity. The unity stated in the confession that Jesus is Lord was actualized in a variety of ways responding to the differing situations in which the Gospel was announced. If the episcopal form of government under the unifying role of the bishop of Rome rather than other forms came gradually to be adopted in the early Church, the reason was that this type of structure best allowed the church to maintain unity, to fight effectively the spiritualizing threat of gnosticism and to protect itself from persecutions by the state.

a) Gospel as Praxis

Though the Gospels recount things pertaining to Jesus and his ministry that happened much prior to the preaching of the Apostles they were written down at a later stage. The earliest documents of the New Testament are the Pauline letters written between 48 and 55 A.D., namely within some 18 and 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since the events were within the vivid memory of many people living at that time the description of the events was not a great priority. The Gospel is presented as a moral appeal "to turn away from idols to God, to serve the true and living God and to wait for his Son to come from heaven - his Son Jesus, whom he raised from death and who rescues us from God's anger that is coming" (1 Thess.9-10). Paul is content with a brief summary of what he preached to the churches he founded, a kerygma which he did not create, but received and shared with other Christian leaders like Apollo and Peter: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, to the twelve, then to more than five hundred of his followers at once, most of whom are still alive" (1 Cor. 15:3-6). The foundation of the Christian proclamation is Jesus' death, burial, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances. Paul emphasizes the basic need of salvation. The religious hero of Christianity is a human being who was crucified. This was in sharp contrast to what was expected by the culture of the time: Paul forcefully

presents the sharp contrast presented by Christianity: "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:2-4).

What is presented is the contrasting pictures of two specific institutions, the world and the church, the body of Christ. The world is dominated by the power of sin and a lifestyle characterized by fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like, while the church is guided by the Spirit and has a lifestyle characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control etc. (Gal. 5: 19-23). This was a challenge to the individualism of the Greek world in which each one was free to choose his own deity native or foreign, Diana or Artemis or Isis or Mitra or Apollo. Even Corinthians had misunderstood Paul's first preaching of freedom as a release from all restrictions and an empowerment to do anything one wanted. But Paul tells them that one belonged either to the world or to the crucified Christ. Freedom is actually a transition from slavery to one to submission to the other, from the one that leads to death to the other that leads to life. Thus chapters 5 to 14 of 1 Corinthians are directed against those who believed that life in Christ released them from all restraints. Similarly Romans chapters 3 to 8 is the answer to those who complain that replacing the rule of Judaic law with Christ's rule of love is a sanction to lawlessness. Paul takes very seriously the matter of discipline as an intrinsic part of the Christian growth process. As he discusses love (*agape*) at great length in chapters 13 and 14 of 1 Cor. he expects that the gift of love should be the criterion used in all decisions affecting the Christian life and the church.

b) The Gospel of the Suffering Saviour

Slowly this Christian praxis of life came to find its focus in the person of Jesus. Mark stating the Christian message some forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus uses the term 'gospel'. Only later was the term applied also to the narratives of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus written by Matthew, Luke and John as well. Matthew in the very first sentence referred to what he wrote as 'biblos', a book, and Luke's was a 'narrative', and John did not give any title. Only Mark actually referred to what he wrote as "Gospel". The term was widely used in the imperial Roman cult to designate the benefits that the members of the empire enjoyed through the gracious authority of Caesar, viewed as the divinely appointed ruler of

Rome. In the non-Christian world the term was applied also to the victory in battle, birth or enthronement of a Roman ruler. A calendar inscription from Priene in Asia Minor dated 9 B.C. hails Augustus Caesar's birth day as "joyful news (*evaggelion*) for the world." Mark takes up this secular term and transforms it by giving it a new content, namely the saving benefits wrought by God's action in Jesus Christ. He preserves the original meaning of the term, an oral proclamation of Jesus Christ who is formally declared the 'Son of God'.¹² All titles in the New Testament such as Son of God, Christ, Son of David and Lord are ways in which the early Church attempted to describe the uniqueness of the Christ event.¹³ Though the title 'Son of God' had a Jewish background, its early Christian use was heavily influenced by Hellenistic religious thought, especially by the concept of a divine man known and worshipped for his miracle working abilities.¹⁴ To the emperor too such miracle working abilities were attributed.

Mark was actualizing the Gospel in his unique context. While his audience tended to see in the 'Son of God' title the miracle working divine man, Mark saw Jesus' uniqueness not in the miracles but in his suffering and death. Against the backdrop of Greek mythology concerning Hippolyte, Antigone, and other tragic figures, the self-emptying sufferer had a divine character. Mark is writing the gospel at a time when the role of the Messiah was widely misunderstood. On the eve of the Roman attack on Jerusalem many came out claiming to be messiahs capable of driving out the enemy. So Jesus warns his disciples against the false prophets and messiahs (13:21-22). At the beginning of his ministry though he works miracles and drives out demons and is declared by them "the Son of God" he enjoins strict secrecy. Even when Peter confesses him as the Messiah he asks the disciples not to tell that to any one, but rebukes Peter when he shows that he understood the title in a political sense. The messianic secret was that he was not a triumphant Son of God, but a suffering messiah. So he introduces the new title "Son of Man" and speaks "plainly" that the "Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." He makes the prediction three times (8:31; 9:31; and 10:43b-45). It was when he died crying "My God,

12. Cf. Willi Marxen, *Mark the Evangelist*, Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1969, p. 138
13. Cf. Gunther Bomkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Harper Row, 1960, pp.226- 231
14. See Ralph P.Martin, *Mark, Evangelist and Theologian*, Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1972, pp. 17-50; 140-172

my God why hast thou abandoned me" that the Roman centurion, who had a clear idea of a divine man surrendering himself to suffering, declares: "Truly this man was the Son of God" (I 5:39).

This figure of the suffering Son of God had clear ethical implications to Mark's audience. "If any one would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (8:34-35). The lifestyle presented by Jesus is one of humility and service. "If any one would be first he must be last of all and servant of all" (9:35). He further affirms it when some disciples clearly misunderstanding the role of the messiah ask for seats on his right and his left (10:37). "For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (10:43b-45).

c) Gospel as the Manual of Righteousness

Matthew is writing his *biblos* after the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in 70 A.D. when all but the Pharisees of the many Judaic groups have completely disappeared and it was time to pick up the pieces and build up a new world order. So he actualizes the gospel with its five moral discourses as a catechism to instruct his community in the fundamentals of living as loyal disciples of Jesus Christ. Matthew is addressing a church which is Jewish-Christian in origin with good many gentile converts. The new orientation given to the community may be summarised as ethics and eschatology. One has to prepare the world in strict moral living in view of its impending end at the second coming of Christ. Freed from the six hundred and thirteen prescriptions of the Law the Jewish Christians took the new religion as less rigorous. Matthew comments on this attitude: "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (5:20).

There are strong analogies between the structure of the Law of Moses and that of the Law of Jesus presented by Matthew: Jesus goes up a mountain, sits down in good rabbinic fashion, to give instruction to the select community of his disciples. The five moral discourses of Matthew are similar to the five books of Pentateuch. Emphasis is placed on the spirit and attitude of the law than on its mere external observance. In describing the beatitudes, those declared fortunate are not the physically poor, but the "poor in spirit", not simply those who are hungry and thirsty but those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Jesus did not come to do away with the

law and the prophets but to fulfill them even to their lowest details. The old moral prescriptions are made spiritual orientations of the human person. It is not enough to avoid murder, but also any injury to others or anger against them. Not only adultery but even lustful thought is forbidden. Divorce for any reason whatever is prohibited. It is not enough that one fulfills one's oaths but should also avoid creating occasions that call for oaths. One should not take any revenge but should not even resist injury. One should love one's enemies, so that we may be like the Father in heaven who shines the sun on the righteous as well as the wicked and sends rain to both the just and the unjust. "You must be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (5:48). One's final judgment will be according to one's dealings with one's neighbour. "Whenever you did this to one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (25:40).

In the Lord's Prayer, which is a summary of Jesus' teaching, central to the actualization of the gospel in the Matthean community is the request "Thy Kingdom come!" Kingdom of God is actually central to Jesus' teaching. Many of his parables deal with the nature and content of that kingdom. Matthew adds to this request in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven". This fulfilment of God's will is absolutely necessary for the actualization of the Gospel. The petition 'Give us this day the bread we need' shows further the eschatological character of this kingdom. As Joachim Jeremias suggests, its actual meaning may be "Give us tomorrow's bread today" suggesting that the heavenly manna, that come from beyond, has broken in but is not yet fulfilled.¹⁵

d) A Theology of Compassion

Luke's Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles* constituting almost one fourth of the whole New Testament, though formally addressed to an official called Theophilus, from its contents appears as the work of a sub-apostolic writer who wanted to actualize the gospel in an extremely conservative Christian community that looked down on sinners, Samaritans and women. In the gospel his own personal additions to what he has borrowed from Mark and Q consist of Jesus' work in Galilee (4:14- 9:50), his journey to Jerusalem (9:51- 19:27), and his final days in Jerusalem (19:28- 23:49), plus an epilogue of appearances of the Risen Lord to his disciples especially to the two going to Emmaus (23:50-24:53).

15. Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Proclamation of Jesus*, New York: Scribner, 1971, pp. 199-200

Jesus in Lucan writings shows a special concern for the despised and marginalized sections of society. The Samaritans who shared history with the Jews were despised by them for worshiping God not in Jerusalem but on Mount Garisim. Of the ten lepers healed by Jesus only the one Samaritan comes back to thank him, and is specially praised for it (17:15-16). In the parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25-37) given by Jesus to explain the good neighbour it is not the priest or the levite but the alien Samaritan who comes to the help of the unfortunate traveller going from Jerusalem to Jericho, left half dead on the way by robbers. Similarly Luke's gospel of compassion has a special concern for women, who formed the weaker section of society. Jesus raises back to life the dead son of the widow of Naim (7:11-17). He comes to the defense of the woman sinner who ventures into the dining hall of the Pharisee to weep at the feet of the Master (7:36-50). He and his disciples were accompanied on their journeys by several women "who provided for them out of their means" (8:3).

e) Jesus the Focus of the New Community

The five books that constitute the Johannine literature have a common approach to the actualization of the gospel in the context of the community. They trace the transitions and growth of a given Christian community over a significant span of time. As Raymond E. Brown suggests the gospel itself evolved over a good number of years marking good many stages of development¹⁶. At the heart of the problem was the refusal of the Jewish community to recognize Jesus as the messiah and the threat to excommunicate any one who confessed him. Professor Louis J. Martyn shows how in 85 A.D. the 12th of the eighteen benedictions recited in Synagogue worship was revised to add "Let the Nazarenes [Christians] and the minim [heretics] be destroyed in a moment"¹⁷. This excommunication of Christians from Judaism raised the question of the very nature of the Jewish Community. John 5:36-59 presents a heated dialogue between those who accepted Jesus and those who rejected him. Those who accepted Christ present two arguments: 1) If you accept the Scriptures as the source of eternal life, you should understand that they point to Jesus. 2) If you oppose the authority of Abraham and Moses to that of Jesus these very same bear witness to Christ, and they will condemn you for rejecting him.. The thrust

16. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (I-xii)* Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, pp.xxxiv ff.

17. J.Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, New York: Harper & Row; 1968; rev.ed. Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1979, p.36

of the whole argument is that the living reflection on the Scripture, which is accepted as the word of God cannot be meaningful and valid without Jesus who is the Word. So the gospel of John starts with the Prologue on the Word, the Word which was made flesh and dwelt in the midst of the human community. Similarly the community that traces its origin to Abraham and Moses who were prophets pointing to the future would be meaningless without the fulfilment of their expectation in the Risen Lord. Jesus' statement "Before Abraham was I am" (Jn 5:58) is a clear pointer to God's self-definition to Moses "I am who I am!" (Exodus 3:14).

Even Jesus' passion and death are placed in the context of the community.. He looks forward to it as a mission, an "hour" for which he is sent. At several moments in his life he had indicated that his hour had not yet come. This hour finally arrives and it is shown as a moment of love and surrender for the sake of the community: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come, to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (13:1). In the context of the excommunication of 85 A.D. the Christian community shows the new style of Jesus' ministry by placing the cleansing of the temple at its beginning rather than at the end as the Synoptics do. Similarly the nature of the new community inaugurated by the suffering and death of Jesus is shown by the washing of the feet of the disciples by Jesus at the beginning of the "farewell discourses" which are instructions to the Johannine church. In fact it takes the place which the institution of the Eucharist has in the other gospels: "I have given you an example that you also should do as I have done to you (13:15)". The style of Christian discipleship is that of humble service to the other.

The foot washing gesture is further amplified by the category of love as a new commandment: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35). This love becomes the central theme in Johannine literature. It is the motive for keeping the commandments (14:15). The specific ethical appeal to love is illustrated in I Jn 3:17-18: "If any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth." The complaint against the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:4 is "that you have abandoned the love you had at first."

This diversity of ways in which the Gospel is actualized and Jesus, the Word of God presented in the documents of the New Testament raises the question how Jesus can be actualized in the modern world. He is not an ideology nor a programme of action. In the twenty seven documents of the New Testament the same Jesus, the Word of God, is presented as emerging out of radically different human situations as the divine answer to man's basic concerns, as the explosion of God's rule and kingdom. The great religious leaders like Buddha, Mohammed and Jesus did emerge out of human history neither explaining well defined ideologies nor distributing ready made sacred books. Each one of them presented a distinctive response of faith in a given context. For example Buddha set the wheel of Dharma turning for the whole world by showing the emptiness of all phenomenal world. Mohammed expanded the blood relationship of the tribal communities into a faith relationship demanding that God's law should be obeyed in God's world. Moses showed that God had intervened in human history and spoken to human beings and that people should remain loyal to God's covenant. Each one of them is addressing the whole human race, yet presenting a distinctive religious message. On the one hand what each one of them presented was a religion since it presents an encounter with God in faith. On the other hand, religion is not merely a question of forming an idea of God but of transforming human life in the light of that faith. So the adequacy of any religion will depend on its capacity to form a proper anthropology of humans with God as ultimate meaning.

III. Proclaiming Jesus to India

Actually the task of the Christian missionary is to show what ultimate meaning and good news of salvation Jesus brings to India today rather than the contributions made by other religions in their particular historical contexts. Since encountering God in faith has a certain wholeness, what one religion contributes to the given tradition of another religion may be mostly making explicit what actually is already implicitly there. The Spirit of God is no religion's monopoly but present in every human heart. Similarly the saints, to whatever religious tradition they may belong, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Theresa and especially Jesus Christ now free of the time-space limitations of earthly existence are present to every human being. What God has already accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus is for all human beings. After all the Church is only a sacrament, the fullness of which is the Kingdom of God.

So evangelization is mostly inter-religious dialogue, inquiring from followers of other religions how God has spoken to them in history and is

present to them in their traditions and showing them one's own religious heritage which is the common property of all humans and hence also theirs just for the asking. Actually there is no plurality of religions, but only different facets of the one divine plan for the salvation of all human beings. Here one has to look at Christianity that was before the twenty seven books of the New Testament were written, pronounced before the definitions and anathemas of the ecumenical councils were pronounced, before all the creeds and catechisms and the code of Canon Law were promulgated, when becoming a Christian was just a matter of confessing Jesus as Lord and Saviour. What the Church provides may be an external complement to what has already been accomplished in the hearts of people by the Spirit, present in every heart, and the Risen Jesus who was constituted Son of God and head of all humanity through his resurrection (Rom. 1:4)! So the plurality of religions is no challenge to the Church in Asia. It has to be realized that what these different religions present are dimensions of the faith we profess, God's free gift to all his children, dimensions which we may have neglected or forgotten. As Julius Cardinal Dharmaatmadja, the President Delegate of the Synod for Asia stated in his closing remarks at the proclamation of *Ecclesia in Asia* in New Delhi in November 1999: what is called for is that churches in Asia should take on the "face of Asia" so that it is "specifically characterizing Asia" and "at the same time becomes the more meaningful for Asian society, particularly for the poor and underprivileged." With regard to other religions "the local churches should be capable of seeing the religious values and the culture they embody". "The new way the Church bears itself will enable these people to understand us better, enable them to come closer to us, but also enrich us in return in the way we live our Christian lives."¹⁸

a) Back to Christo-centrism

According to *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II what unites all religions is that "Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of men are the same today as in the ages past. What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behaviour, and what is sinful?"¹⁹ Though the answers given by different religions are not the same, the focus is human life and its problems. It is in this focus of human suffering, doubt, question and struggle that the Asian culture finds its unity. Suffering is not a mere phenomenon which one merely contemplates as something out there,

18. Cf. *Vidyajyoti*, Dec. 1999, pp. 888-91

19. *Nostra Aetate*, No..1

but experiences deep within oneself. So the fellowship of sufferers is not through an organization from the outside but from the depth of one's own experience of what the other is undergoing. It is after the sight of sickness, old age and death that Siddhartha Gautama goes in search of the meaning of suffering and comes to the realization of the four Noble Truths, and becomes an illumined man. "In Hinduism people seek release from the trials of the present life by ascetical practices, profound meditation and recourse to God in confidence and love."²⁰ About Jesus the Messiah the prophets foretold that he would be a man of suffering, and after the resurrection Jesus asks the two disciples leaving Jerusalem in disgust at the crucifixion of the Messiah: "Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:26).

Humanism is at the heart of Christianity. In fact the Son of God became incarnate to reveal not particularly the divine secrets that are incomprehensible to human beings, but rather themselves. This is the radical difference between Christianity and the Graeco-Roman religions. The Greeks and Romans made every one including the emperor, who did some good to humanity, a god, and the Olympian heaven was populated by great many goddesses. Christianity, on the other hand, showed that humanity should be redeemed by its own resources. Most of the early heresies were those that denied the humanity of Jesus and made him a God merely appearing as a man. Most of the feminine functions in human salvation were ascribed by various religions to goddesses. Christianity attributed them first to the Holy Spirit, the supposedly feminine principle in God, but slowly shifted them to the human side namely the maternal role of a simple virgin from Nazareth, Mary the mother of Jesus and also to the intercession of the saints..

But there are two extremes to this humanism. One is the lingering docetism in the form of Monophysitism, which makes Christ's humanity a fusion of divinity and humanity at least after the Incarnation. This was squarely condemned as heresy incompatible with the Christian idea of salvation. The opposite extreme is a sort of materialistic humanism which wants to restrict Jesus to his time-place circumstances of two thousand years ago. This comes from an a-priori conception of salvation as a purely this worldly struggle. According to Michael Amaladoss S.J. "History is a process of struggle between God and Mammon. All peoples and all religions are engaged in this in their own way ... Jesus, in his life, work and death shows

20. Ibid, No.2

a particular way of carrying on this struggle by opting for the poor and the oppressed." Jesus has done his work and gone. What remains is that "his disciples continue his mission,"²¹ and tell the Jesus' story. "We tell people who Jesus was, how he lived, healed and reconciled people, empowered the poor."²² Statements such as that Jesus was able to win salvation for all people because he was the Son of God, that through the Paschal Mystery Jesus became once and for all both the accomplishment of a humanity recreated and renewed according to the plan of God, that Jesus has established a communion between human beings and the like are judged by Amaladoss a divinization of the humanity of Jesus. To the statement of *Ecclesia in Asia* that "contemplating Jesus in his human nature, the peoples of Asia find their deepest questions answered, their hopes fulfilled, their dignity uplifted and their despair conquered" (# 14) Amaladoss asks "If this is so, one wonders why there is no big rush among the Asian people to become disciples of Jesus and to join the Church,"²³ and suggests that we should reflect a little on our claims. The answer to that question is: Was the really human Jesus ever presented to Asia? Was he not presented more often as 'a God' to impress people who often worshipped many gods, or rather as the colonialist conquerer, in whose name the European nations marched out to conquer the world?

If we examine objectively the limited humanity of Jesus who lived two thousand years ago and the enormous task of transforming human lives throughout history, there is no comparison. One can only forget the past and engage in the present day struggles. Church's doctrine about the intercession of saints is particularly relevant. When it is said that it is through the prayer of Stephen that Paul was converted one does not mean that Stephen exerted pressure on God to grant Paul's conversion which he was initially unwilling to give. As Aquinas points out its meaning is not that God willed the conversion of Paul on account of Stephen, but that he willed that Paul should be converted dependently of Stephen. Even today the Church demands that there should be at least a few miracles that are worked through the intercession of a particular individual, before he or she is canonized a saint. This shows that God has empowered that individual with certain functions in the Church. This is especially true about Jesus who by his identity with the person of the Son has naturally become the New Adam and is empowered regarding all human beings.

21. Michael Amaladoss, "The Image of Jesus in the Church in Asia", *Jeevadhara*, No.177 (May 2000), pp. 281-289

22. *Ibid*, p.289

23. *Ibid*, p. 283

If we look at the consciousness of Jesus with his intimate relation with the Father and the unique selfhood rooted in the one Son, the creative Word, the whole history of salvation flows spontaneously through that authentic human self-consciousness. Besides, this attempt to deny human Jesus the universal power of salvation is clearly against the teaching of Scripture. The New Testament writers were fully aware of the contrast between the human limitations of Jesus and the universal redemption accomplished by this same limited humanity. Their tendency was to start with the Risen Saviour in all his glory and project him back into his earthly life. Raymond Brown remarks: "In a pre-Gospel period, as attested by Paul and the sermons in the Acts, the resurrection was the chief moment of association with the divine proclamation of the identity of Jesus."²⁴ The resurrection was contrasted with the lowly ministry, in reward for which "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Through the resurrection Jesus "was constituted Son of God (Rom. 1:3-4). He is present in hearts through faith (Eph. 3:17). This belonged particularly to human Jesus who became the head of all humanity, and offered the sacrifice of redemption in the name of the whole human race. That is why he is "constituted" Son through the resurrection in power! Because he was obedient to the death of the Cross "God exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:8-9). Referring to the first man Adam who was "created a living being" Paul says that "last Adam is the life-giving Spirit" (I Cor. 15:45). Paul states that he did not care to know Jesus according to the flesh (2 Cor. 5:16), since his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus was enough for him. Similarly Mark writes of Mary, Jesus' mother, and the other members of his family as people who did not really understand him, thought that he had gone mad, and came in a body to take charge of him. In the later New Testament writings there is a tendency to down play the humanity of Jesus and over-emphasize the divinity (Mt. 14:33; 16:16). They are somewhat embarrassed by the fact that Jesus received baptism at the hands of John the Baptist, that he was ignorant about many things and made many factual mistakes about persons and events of Judaic history.. "The stories of the ministry were shaped in Christian tradition without a knowledge of the infancy material; and evangelists never really smoothed out all the narrative rough spots left by the joining of two bodies of once independent material."²⁵

24. Raymond E. Brown S. S, *The Birth of the Messiah, A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977, p.29

25. *Ibid*, p.32

What Asia needs today is the really human Jesus who identified himself with his brothers and sisters in everything except sin. As Archbishop Orlando Quevedo stated in his opening remarks at the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, today there is "an Asian vision of a renewed Church, a movement towards the Church of the poor and of the young, a movement towards a local Church, a movement toward deep interiority, a movement toward an authentic community of faith, a movement toward active integral evangelization, a movement toward empowerment of the laity, and movement toward generating and serving life."²⁶ In the final statement of FABC there was no discussion of interreligious dialogue, which was taken for granted, nor a mention of other religions as a challenge. The list of real challenges in the mission include globalization, fundamentalism, politics, ecology, and militarisation²⁷.

b) Neither Greek nor Jew

"An ugly element on the Indian scene today", writes Fr. Andrew, a Missionary of Charity, who visited India after eight years in Australia, "is the hostility towards Christianity coming from a very vocal and powerful sector of Hindu society which now forms the government ... It is not new. It is a streak - not unlike the KuKluxKlan - that traces back to the assassins of Mahatma Gandhi. The rhetoric is centred on religion. But it needs to be noted that the fiercest attacks occur in areas where the grip of money-lending and privileged castes has long been strong. This hostility has followed the entry of the Church with primary schools, social programmes and a faith that gives people a confidence and awareness of their own dignity that has made them less vulnerable to control and domination."²⁸ The unique contribution Jesus made to a world in which a minute 5% alone was wealthy and wielded power and the rest were condemned as "people of the earth" (*am aarez*), was to declare the poor, the hungry and the weeping blessed because they were the heirs of the Kingdom of God. In the present world of post-modernity the predominance of science and technology are questioned, the dominance of technical reason is down-graded, the overall importance of profit motive denied and the ideal of indefinite progress recognized as impossible. What unites people today is a revolution in the relation of humanity to nature, namely that instead of raping nature humans should make the earth hospitable to all God's children. There are revolutionary changes in the concept of justice in the social relations between fellow human beings indicated by the self-awakening of all oppressed and suppressed humans to their fundamental human rights of personhood and

26. Quoted by Edmund Chia, "Interreligious Dialogue in Ecclesia in Asia", *Jeevadhara* No. 177 (May 2000) p.307

27. *Ibid*, pp.307-309

28. Privately circulated news letter

peoplehood, especially the values of liberty, equality of participation in power and society. Besides, at the same time as recognizing the autonomy of the secular realm, there is a revulsion against secularism through a deepening sense of the divine that holds everyone responsible for his or her actions.

Equality of all human beings as members of one race is the common concern of most religions. In early Hinduism the sacrifice of Prajapati in which the whole creation participated was the principle of unity of all creation, particularly of the human race. But later Hinduism divided human beings, perhaps originally as a method of division of labour, into different castes ascribing their differences to their origin from different organs of the Cosmic Person, the Creator, or to their differing merits in their former lives. Even today in spite of such rationalizations, this is a serious problem with that religion. A great mass of people are left as impure or untouchable, condemned to be virtual slaves of the upper castes, performing for them the most menial functions. Today the real reason for the great uproar against conversion of Dalits and Tribals into other religions including even Buddhism is not actually religious but mostly political and economic, namely the loss of hundreds of thousands of people who formed the work force to till the fields and clean the dry latrines with their bare hands for the privileged upper castes. Buddhism arose against this division of people into castes and classes and claimed that everyone had the Buddha nature which could eventually attain illumination. Islam replaced the bond of blood that pitted one tribe against another with the bond of faith which made all members of the one *umma*. Guru Nanak founded the religion of Sikhism to reconcile the warring Hindus and Muslims in order to bring them together through *sangat* and *pangat*, namely sitting together at the feet of the same Guru and partaking of the same food. Today Hindus pretend that Sikhs are Hindus.

The basis of the Christian contribution in this respect is the faith communicated by the immediate disciples of Christ that Jesus, his life, death and resurrection marked the unique entry of the Son of God into human history proclaiming divine forgiveness to all humans in the solidarity of their sinfulness. As the one human intimately united in the person of the Son he was through his resurrection constituted the Son of God for all humanity as its head. This has made possible mutual forgiveness between persons and between peoples and has established a new human communion as the Kingdom of God and the Body of Christ, transcending all geographical, cultural and natural divisions. So St. Paul tells the Galatians: "you were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free men, between men and women; you are all one in

union with Christ Jesus" (Gal.3:27-28). As the reason for avoiding anger, passion, and hateful feelings, insults and obscene talk the Epistle to the Colossians says: "For you have taken off the old self with its habits and put on the new self, which God its creator is constantly renewing in his own image, in order to bring you to a full knowledge of himself. As a result, there is no longer any distinction between Gentiles and Jews, barbarians, savages, slaves, and free men, but Christ is all, Christ is in all." (Col.3: 9-11). This community is expressed sacramentally by the Eucharist, sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ. Though it is the Church that celebrates the Eucharist, it is the Eucharist that creates the Church and its ministry of mutual forgiveness. Church is the sacramental sign of the unity of all humanity effectively communicating to all the Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

c) Salvation is the Struggle for Humanization

All religions recognize that there is a divine destiny for humans and what unites them in a common pilgrimage is the daily experience that they are unable to be what they want to be. There is a feeling of contradiction and of a certain lack of authenticity within each one. Some religions like Hinduism and Buddhism say that this is an illusion which can be got rid of by gnosis, a certain realization of the emptiness of this world, and the attainment of wisdom. But other religions say that there is a real obstacle to human freedom, which is sin. It has to be taken seriously and has to be got rid of. In either way it is 'anrta' falsehood for the Hindus, lack of straightforwardness and honesty regarding oneself for the Greeks. The same is indicated by the Hebrew word '*hatah*', and '*hamartia*' of the Greeks, missing the mark, a transgression or overstepping of certain boundaries, straying from the right path. In the personalist religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam it is disobedience to God, a revolt. All the Biblical images of sin present it as revolt from dependence on God, Creator and Father, a fratricide, an effort of the human to manage one's own affairs, setting oneself as a pseudo-absolute over against the unique absoluteness of God, the source and goal of all things.. But the problem is not with God but with the humans themselves. No religion, however, mentions sin for its own sake but only as the backdrop against which humans have to work out their salvation, which literally is 'sarvation' attainment of '*sarvam*' fulfilment. For Plato and the Greeks the present human condition is abnormal because the spiritual soul is put into matter for its own training, and salvation is getting away from matter. For all gnostic religions salvation is realizing the emptiness of matter and the sole reality of the spirit. But ultimately salvation is the attainment of one's authentic humanity.

d) Scope and Goal of Religion is Universal Fellowship

The strange fact of world religions is that each one of them claims to be for the whole humanity, and none of them says that it is only for a limited group of human beings. So historically all religions are the common heritage of all human beings. But at the same time their emphases are different on account of the differing historical contexts in which they appeared, and the diverse socio-cultural and moral expressions they gave to their faith. Their ultimate aim, however, is to benefit the whole humanity to provide a better future to all human beings. So the only reasonable way they can relate to each other is to find in other religions dimensions of their own faith. But as human expressions and interpretations of the God-given faith none of them can claim to be absolute and all perfect. In fact each one of them may have overlooked or misinterpreted one or other aspect of that faith. Hence evangelization, namely communicating the good news of one's own unique experience to others, is also a process of learning from them. So evangelization is a common task of religions to bring all humanity to encounter its common destiny, and each of them has a unique contribution to make in the discovery of the common good of humanity.

In this new world situation Christian theology and the work of evangelization has great scope and a bright future. This is the first time since Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity that the Church is able to move outside the shadow of imperialism. Aphraat the Persian sage says about the situation of the Church of his times outside the Roman Empire. The old church is adulterous. The people of the nations is a holy and faithful people, who came down from the mountain of their pride and ad here to the Lord. "And this is the Church of the nations gathered from all tongues."²⁹ According to Aphraat the words of Isaías 42:6 "He gave you a covenant to peoples and light to the nations" is about Christ, who became light and saviour. Since he is present in every heart along with the Spirit of God there is no need to prove his presence or divinity.. The other religions are no longer a challenge to mission, and the moral teaching of the Synoptic Gospels especially the Sermon on the Mount is not the main point of contact between Christians and people of other faiths. Jesus of St. John's Gospel, who is word, light and life and Word from the Father is the one who is available to all who seek him!

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Kanyakumari

29. Aphraat, the Persian Sage: Demonstratio XVI, "Gentiles Populi infideli *Patrologia Syriaca*, I, ed. Graffin, Paris, 1905

Aquinas and Sankara

A Comparison of Their Theological Approaches

Gaston Kanjuparambil

The author examines two radically differing styles of theological thinking, namely, the epistemological approach of Thomas Aquinas and the realization method of Sankaracharya. The fundamental difference between them is in their approach to God. According to Sankara knowledge of Brahman begins with *Sruthi* and inner moral preparation, while to Aquinas even the Reality like Nirguna Brahman can be arrived at by reason alone. In spite of such differences, there seem to be remarkable similarities in their thinking, such as the identity of views between Nirguna Brahman of Sankara and Deus in se of Aquinas. Again, the notion of Nirguna Brahman of the one is reconcilable with the personal God of the other. This is a summary of Dr. Gaston Kanjuparambil's thesis approved by the University of Kerala for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Religious thinking is very much conditioned by the culture in which it is exercised, the particular questions that are being asked and the philosophical methodology that is being employed. At a particular time in history with the evolution of logical thinking different religions went their separate ways, because the Greeks asked "what" the Supreme Being was, looking for his essence; the Hebrews inquired "who" created heaven and earth, and the Indians sought "from where" the origin, sustenance and final dissolution of all things came. Today in trying to reverse this trend we have to bring religions together in a sort of cultural encounter and compare the way they discuss the different questions concerning God, his attributes and the other problems of religion.

I. Two Patterns of Theologizing

As an effort at inter-culturation this paper proposes to compare Sankara, the undisputed leader of Indian religious thinking with St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest of Christian philosopher-theologians. It may appear very queer to compare this Mediaeval Scholastic philosopher, whose views some consider as outmoded¹, with Sankara, who though earlier than

1. See for example Dr.C.J.Wright, "Roman Catholic Principles and the Future"

St. Thomas, seems to be still modern to some. We in India may be tempted to think in this manner. There may be, however, in other parts of the world, many who think otherwise, and for whom Thomism is the greatest living philosophy. But whatever be one's conviction, one cannot ignore these two philosophers even while disagreeing with them, as they are the two outstanding thinkers from radically different cultures, greatest representatives of East and West. Aquinas has the Graeco-Western rational approach to God, while Sankara is an example of the Eastern method of moving from intuition to rational explanation.

That Sankara is a living force in India cannot be gainsaid. His sway is supreme in the realm of Indian philosophy and religion. As Olivier Lacombe in the introduction to his *L'Absolu selon la Vedanta* (p.5) says: "Sankaracharya, the master, has the first place in the philosophical conscience of contemporary India, and the glory of his great name takes certainly pride of place in Indian thinking." Advaita stands so far above the other systems of Vedanta that Vedanta without qualification has almost come to mean Advaita. Both in quality and number of intelligent adherents, it stands far above the other systems of Vedanta. Even outside India, Vedanta of the Advaitic type seems to widen its hold on people more and more. This is especially the case since Swami Vivekananda, owing to the work of Ramakrishna Order, whose official philosophy is Advaita.

Nor is St. Thomas simply a figure of the past. Bertrand Russell states "St. Thomas is not only of historical interest, but is a living influence like Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hegel more in fact than the latter two."² He is the quasi-official philosopher and theologian of the Catholic Church. The Church recognized his sanctity when he was canonized on July 12, 1323 by Pope John XXII, his doctrine recognized in 1567 when he was declared 'Doctor Angelicus' by Pope Pius V. His philosophy was given greater authority by Pope Leo XIII through his encyclical *Eterni Patris* dated 4th August 1879, in which he restored Christian philosophy according to the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas. While instructing the teachers "to instill the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas into the minds of their students" the pope also warns against the

The Hibbert Journal, vol LXIX Oct. 1960, & July 1961: "The day of Aquinas can never return. His *Summa Theologica* is as outmoded as the duality of knowledge, he set out to safeguard. It is grounded in the outmoded dichotomy that until the nineteenth century pervaded every so-called Christian Church's thought. It sundered the 'Natural' from the 'Supernatural' and the 'Supernatural' from the 'Natural'."

2. Bertand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, London: 1962, p.444

dangers of sterile imitation to perpetuate what was time-conditioned in Thomas's work.³ Of late the Second Vatican Council endorsed the directive of pope Leo: In the decree on 'Priestly Formation' the Council says: "Then by way of making the mysteriess of salvation known as thoroughly as they can be, students should learn to penetrate them more deeply with the help of speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St.Thomas."⁴

Similarities between Sankara and Aquinas

Comparison between Sankara and Aquinas is not anything novel. Almost a century ago J.N.Farquhar had pointed out one particular aspect and compared these two thinkers. He says: "Indian scholars frequently speak of Sankara as one of the greatest of world's thinkers. The truth seems to be that he never questioned the truth of the basis of the Vedanta, yet within these theological limits Sankara displays consummate philosophical capacity; he is the Thomas Aquinas of Hinduism."⁵ As stated above, in spite of their being consummate philosophers, they are primarily theologians. Their master-pieces, the *Brahmasutrabhasya* and the *Summa Theologica* are theological works. Their main concern was not to be philosophers in the manner of Descartes, Kant or Hegel, but to explain reasonably their religions. Sankara's works are mostly interpretations of the *prasthanatraya*, the three traditional sources of Hindu doctrine, the Vedanta Sutras, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. St Thomas, though primarily a theologian, has left numerous works on philosophy also. The fact that these were primarily theologians does not mean that they had no philosophical system. Theology is philosophizing on religion. It is clear⁶ that one can never be a good theologian unless one is a good philosopher also. To call Sankara and Aquinas, great theologians is to call them implicitly great philosophers as well. Both have tried their best to give a rational demonstration of the truths of revelation. It is this aspect that has made Farquhar call Sankara the 'Thomas Aquinas of Hinduism.'

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3. Cf. Joseph Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas, Three Essays*, trs. By Daniel O'Connor, London, pp. 107,108
 4. Walter M.Abbot, *The Documents of Vatican II*, London, 1966, p.452
 5. J.N.Farquhar, *An Outline of Religious Literature of India*, Oxford University Press, 1920, pp. 173-74. Albert Schweitzer says: "The greatest of the commentators is Sri Sankara (9th cent.A.D.) Born of a Southern Indian Brahmin family, to be the Thomas Aquinas of Brhmanism", *Indian Thought and Its Development*, London, 1951, p. 159
 6. Pieper, *Introduction to Thomas Aquinas*, London, 1962, p.24

But there are other resemblances too which make more significant this comparison. Sankara was very remarkably an impersonal writer, in which respect he holds comparison with Aquinas. These two were not like Ramakrishna or St. Augustine whose mind and heart and every inch of their selves were manifest in their sayings and writings. About the impersonality of the writings of St. Thomas Pieper says: "It has been said that the work of St. Thomas is the most impersonal of the thirteenth century." Both Aquinas and Sankara were great mystics and saints. Following an extraordinary vision the former ceased to write completely. He left the *Summa Theologica* unfinished. To Reginald, his friend who asked him why he stopped Thomas replied: "I can write no more. All that I have written seems to be nothing but straw."⁷

Historical Notes on Sankara and Aquinas

Of the two, **Sankara** is well-known in India and there seems to be hardly any one of average information, who does not know something about him. It should, however, be noted that much of what is ordinarily thought of as his biography is mostly legendary. Even the very century in which he lived is not known beyond all doubt. Regarding the legendary life itself it is worth noting that to deny them blindly - excepting certain fantastic stories - would be as unscientific as asserting them, because there are no positive proofs either for or against them. R. de Smet summarises the data concerning his life: "The dates of his life are uncertain. After exploring the whole question again during the last ten years, specialists now agree to place him in the 8th Cent. A.D. and more probably in the second half of that century. A Saiva Brahmin, he was probably born at Kaladi (Malabar) and spent many years in the monastery he founded in Sringeri (Mysore)⁸. He is generally said to have died relatively young either in Kedarnath (Himalayas) or perhaps in Kanci. The other traditional details of his life are legendary."⁹ Sankara has written many works. His style is clear and impersonal. They can be classified into three groups. Eleven works of commentary (*bhasyas*) could be safely considered genuine, viz. *Vedantasutrabhasya*, *Bhagavadgita bhasya*, *bhasyas on Isa Kena, Katha, Prasna, Mundaka, Taittiriya, Aitareya*,

7. Pieper, *Ibid*, p. 46

8. Both his saivite origins and his founding of the Sringeri Mutt are strongly controverted by Paul Hacker, according to whom Sankara came from a Vaishnavite background, and he could never have founded the Sringeri Mutt. See "Relations of Early Advaitins to Vaishnavism", *Philology and Confrontation*, ed. Wilhel Halbfass, SUNY Press, 1995, pp. 33 - 40

9. Jesuit Scholars, *Religious Hinduism*, Allahabad, 1964, p. 52

Chandogya, and *Brihadaranyaka* Upanishads.¹⁰ According to Belvalkar he has written also eight hymns or stotras, such as *Anandalahari* (not absolutely certain), *Govindastaka*, *Dakshinamurtistotram*, (at least the first ten stotras), *Dasasloki*, *Dvadasapanjarika*, *Bhajagovindam*, *Satpadi*, and *Harim ide*.¹¹

Short philosophical treatises too are attributed to him, viz. *Aparokshanubhava* or *aparokshanubhuti*, *atmabodha*, *Upadesasahasri* (only the part in verse) *Satasloki* and *Pancikaraprakriya*. Sankara was the greatest exponent of Advaita, but he was not the originator of the doctrine. There are elements of monism already in the *RgVeda*. When we come to the Upanishads, it is clear that monism is the predominant note. The first systematic exponent of the Advaita doctrine seems to be Gaudapada, who was much influenced by the Buddhist Madhyamika doctrine. Although he gives some important elements of Advaita in his *Karikas*, the real Advaita in its salient points is the work of Sankara. The doctrine underwent significant development also with the successors of Sankara,¹² who were divided into two schools, the Vivarana school headed by Padmapada, Sankara's disciple, and the Bhamati school represented by Vacaspati.

St. Thomas Aquinas was born about the year 1225 at the castle of Roccase a fortress of Terra Laboris, half-way between Rome and Naples. He died in 1274, and since it is stated that he was forty-nine at his death it is argued that his year of birth should have been 1225. At the age of five he was sent as an oblate to the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino, where he lived till 1239 when the monks were expelled by Emperor Frederick II. Then he returned home for a few months after which he was sent to the University of Naples, where he studied till 1244. He naturally followed the traditional liberal arts divided into trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). Attracted by the life of the Dominican friars he joined their convent in Naples in 1244, and owing to the opposition of his parents who wanted him to become a Benedictine monk he was kidnapped by his brothers and kept a prisoner in Aquino for about an year. But his determination finally won and he was able to rejoin the Dominicans who sent him in 1245 to Paris, where he spent four years in his studies. From there accompanied by his teacher St. Albert he went to Cologne for

10. Belvalkar, *Lectures on the Vedanta Philosophy*, Poona, 1929, Part I, lectures 1-6

11. *Ibid*, p. 221

12. Cf. N.K. Devaraja, *An Introduction to Sankara's Theory of Knowledge*, Benares, 1962, p. 23-25

another four years of studies. From Cologne in the year 1252 he was appointed to teach in the Dominican house of St. James in Paris, where at the same time as teaching he gained his academic degrees from the University of Paris. 1259-63 he was at the Papal court at Anagni, Orvieto, Rome and Viterbo, teaching and writing. He was called back to the University of Paris to stem the tide of Averroism. After four years he went to the University of Naples, where until his death he was a teacher of Theology. On his way to attend the Ecumenical Council of Lyons convoked by Pope Gregory X, he died at the Cistercian Abbey of Possanova on March 7, 1274.

Thomas was a prolific writer. In the Paris edition his complete works run to thirty five volumes. His works may be classified into three groups. First come commentaries on Peter Lombard whose Four Books of Sentences, were a sort of text book in schools, on Aristotle whose works formerly prohibited in schools were rediscovered and suddenly became very popular, on an unknown author who was supposed to be Denis the Areopagite,¹³ and on the Sacred Scripture. The second group comprises his masterpieces, *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. The third group contains miscellaneous writings of which the most important are *Quaestiones Disputatae*, and *Quodlibetales*. His writings are extremely lucid, with no reference to his own personal life, and give very little room for misinterpretation. Yet during the major part of his life he had to struggle against actual situations which presented very strong currents of philosophical ideas which he could not accept. He had to defend Aristotle, his texts and his ideas against Averroist humanism which had become then prominent in the faculty of arts of the University of Paris, against different types of Augustinianism including that of St. Bonaventure which had distorted the teachings of Augustine, and the school of Avicenna that introduced Neo-Platonism in the West. He was not a blind follower of Aristotle or Augustine or Ps. Dionysius but on many points he criticized them.

Both Aquinas and Sankara study God. In our study of their doctrine about God we make a slight distinction. St. Thomas was a theologian who held that many things about God like the Trinity, Incarnation and related truths could be known only through divine revelation, while God's existence and attributes could be known by reason unaided by revelation. Here we

13. According to Joseph Pieper a tally of the works of St. Thomas has turned up almost seventeen hundred quotations from Pseudo Dionysius, who was at that time mistakenly taken for Dionysius the Areopagite.. St. Thomas wrote also a commentary on the *Divine Names* of Dionysius

restrict ourselves to the latter, touching upon the revealed truths only in passing. On the other hand modern Vedantins try to establish Advaita from pure reason, while Sankara's system is more theology than philosophy, in the sense that the ultimate principles of Advaita are derived from *Sruti* and not from reason. We are concerned with Sankara whose attitude seems to be different from modern Vedantins.

There seems to be remarkable similarities in spite of fundamental differences, between the ideas of Sankara and Aquinas. One such is the identity of views between the Nirguna Brahman of Sankara with 'God considered in Godself' according to St. Thomas. The happy mingling of the apophatic and cataphatic traditions in both is remarkable. Again the notion of Nirguna Brahman of Sankara is reconcilable with the personal God of Aquinas. One great difference, however, is their approach to God. According to Sankara knowledge of Brahman begins with *Sruti*, and inner moral preparation, while for St. Thomas a reality similar even to Nirguna Brahman can be arrived at by reason alone, unaided by revelation.

II. Approaches to God

There are good many common sense approaches to God which do not require any systematic thinking. Such are what are often indicated as "religious experience" - some vague sense of the presence of God, "mystical experience" - a direct awareness of God and even consciousness of union with Him, which cannot be subjected to any rational scrutiny.¹⁴ Similar to it are approaches through poetic inspiration and aesthetic creation. Then there is the moral approach of Immanuel Kant, who proceeds from the consciousness of the necessity and unconditionality of the moral obligation, which he calls "the categorical imperative"¹⁵. When we come to the systematic and rational approaches we have on the one hand the purely speculative and theoretically demonstrative approach of Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy of the West and the Vedantic approach of Sankara. Thomas approaches God through arguments which are formally and theoretically demonstrative. Sankara, on the other hand, demands an elaborate moral preparation to precede even the very desire to know Brahman. This moral preparation is necessary for one even to become competent (*adhikarin*) for studying *Vedanta*.

14. Cf. H.J. Paton, *The Modern Predicament*, New York, 1962, pp. 146-148.

15. Anderson, James F., *Natural Theology*, Milwaukee, 1962, p. 59

a) The Epistemological Approach of Aquinas

St. Thomas's approach to God and theology is very much based on his epistemology. His whole inquiry is whether and how we actually know God. In the context of the apophatic method very prevalent in his times that stated that we rather know what God is not than what God actually is, his theology tries to show that after knowing that there is God as the infinite final object of our intellect, we naturally desire to know God directly as is really in Godself and that we can have some real knowledge of what God actually is. His philosophical method differs from that of most of his contemporaries since he starts from the epistemological basis of a methodical questioning of all our knowledge. He admits that we should doubt everything: "As that science (metaphysics) is concerned with the general consideration of truth, therefore to it also belongs general doubt about truth."¹⁶ But he does not hold the universal methodological doubt of Descartes, but only means that we ought to test everything, even the first principles to see if they are true. He does not hold that there is only one indubitable truth; there are many truths, and it is impossible to doubt them, and suspend our judgement while searching for some more ultimate truth.

St. Thomas in *De Veritate* discusses in detail the question of 'truth'. The first article of the first question deals with what truth is. He discusses the various definitions given by his predecessors and accepts the definition, "*veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus*" i.e., conformity of intellect with thing or 'adequation between thing and intellect'¹⁷. This is the Aristotelian definition of truth. Aquinas approves the statement of the Philosopher, "*Non est verum et falsum nisi in mente*"¹⁸. It shows that truth is essentially related to intellect and thought. The formal aspect of truth is in the intellect. Truth and error are in the intellect. It is possible only where there is judgement which is an operation of reason associating and dissociating concepts. In other words thoughts rather than things are true.

But when we look into the relation of thought to things, from point of view of its basis, we have to say that truth is in things. If my statement 'he exists' is true, it is because he actually exists outside my mind. If my statement 'he is rational' is true, it is because, he is in fact a living being endowed with reason. St. Thomas is a realist assuming that everything is the thing that it is and not another. He even goes a step further. As Gilson

16. *In III Metaph.*, - lect. 1

17. Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas*, London, 1961, p. 231

18. *6 Metaph. Comm. 8; De Verit. 1. 8*

says St. Thomas goes beyond the Greeks "by making them more profound in existential significance". Taken in what we call its static or essential form, ontological truth merely means that truth is a transcendental, that being and truth are convertible."¹⁹

Since truth is founded in being, knowledge too is so founded; in other words, knowledge is objective. It is by knowledge that we attain truth. Knowledge is apprehended truth. Knowledge is the taking hold of an object by the intellect in a spiritual way. "Knowledge implies the presence of the known in the knower in the knower's own way."²⁰

Knowledge of God

For St. Thomas there are two sources for the knowledge of God, viz. reason and revelation. God in so far as he is known by reason belongs to the field of philosophy, or rather natural theology, which is a branch of metaphysics. Theology proper or sacred theology is based on revelation. St. Thomas discusses God in both these aspects especially in his two *Summas*. The first question he discusses in the *Summa Theologica* is whether the existence of God is known 'per se' St. Thomas rejected the ontological argument of St. Anselm for God's existence, and the position of ontologism which "taught that the first object of knowledge even in this life is God himself who is the first truth, and that through him everything else is known"²¹. For, according to Thomas the idea of the greatest from which Anselm starts is not actually the greatest but only our *idea* of it.²² Besides, to begin with, the light divinely shed within us is the natural light of knowledge, either as regards its nature, for elaborate analysis is required to know the nature of mind, or as regards its existence, for we do not perceive that we have an intelligence except when we perceive that we are understanding something else²³.

The crucial question for Aquinas is whether one can rise from the finite things as effects to an infinite God as their Cause. St. Thomas's answer is that although we cannot have a perfect knowledge of the cause from the effects, still we can show that the cause exists. "From every effect the existence of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from the effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as he is in his essence."²⁴ Though we start with sensible

19. Gilson, op.cit, p.232

20. Summa, 12,4

21. See Opusc.XVI, de Trinitate, 1,3

22. Summa Contr. Gentes LI 0, I 1; Summa Theo 1.1, 2,1

23. Opusc XVI, De Trinitate 1,3

24. Summa Theo 1.1,2,2

material existents, we study them not as sensible material things but as existents and hence the conclusion is to the cause of existence as such.

The Quinque Viae

St Thomas, following his general metaphysical principles holds that any demonstration of God's existence too should start from sense-data. Examining the five dimensions of sensible things, their origin through change, their activity, finite existence, graded perfections and goal-directedness, he takes each one as an approach to God. Donceel following Marechal reduces these five ways to one, namely the principle of causality: "The first three ways of St. Thomas consider God as an efficient cause. The first considers the passing from potency to act in the effect as a sign of God's action, and the second way studies the activity of the immediate cause of some effect as it works under the supreme causality of God. The third way considers the term of divine operation, the created effect itself in its contingency. The fourth way considers God as the exemplary cause of all created reality. Finally the fifth way studies God, not exactly as the end, but as the cause which directs the created agents to their respective ends."²⁵ It should be noted that the principle of causality as generally defined, e.g., by Joseph Marechal²⁶ implies the existence of God, namely that anything which is in any way limited depends on the unlimited being. So Donceel concedes that both these truths must be ultimately based upon a fundamental quasi-intuition of the intellect in which, both are given simultaneously in a pre-reflective unity²⁷. The existence of limited beings is a fact of experience. When considered in this light it is clear that the 'Quinque Viae' of St. Thomas are nothing but five facets of the principle of causality. Actually Aquinas is not applying the abstract principle of causality to concrete cases and drawing the existence of God as a conclusion. In each of the aspects of a thing there is an openness to an Ultimate Reality that excludes all limitations.

As for knowing the nature of God, Aquinas says, "Concerning nothing is it possible to know that it is, without having some knowledge of what it is, either a perfect knowledge or a confused kind of knowledge."²⁸ Of course, regarding God we do not have an intuition of the divine essence. Yet starting from the changeable, caused, contingent, limited and ordered, we can come to the knowledge of that being which is changeless, uncaused, necessary,

25. J.F. Donceel, *Natural Theology*, New York, 1962, p.24

26. J. Marechal re-emphasized the Platonic and Augustinian elements in the Thomistic system

27. Donceel, op.cit. pp.56,5. 28. Summa Theol. I,3, prologue; On Truth, 10. 12.7

unlimited and intelligent. But "two shades of meanings should be distinguished in any name we attribute to God, the very perfection signified, goodness or life as the case may be, and the mode of signification. As regards the former, perfections belong to God properly, and more properly than they do to creatures, for they are his in the primary sense. But as regards the latter, no human term is attributable to God, for it has a mode of signification befitting creatures."²⁹ So the knowledge we have concerning God is negative and analogical.

God is absolutely simple and in no way a composite. Since the first being must of necessity be an act, in him essence and existence are identical. In all finite things existence stands in relation to essence, as act to potency. God, however, is pure act, utterly devoid of potentiality.

Since personality is a supreme value on the human level. St. Thomas attributes it in a pre-eminent manner to God. "Person signifies that which is most perfect in all nature, viz., that which subsists in rational nature."³⁰ Person does not signify any negation but a positive perfection. A problem for St. Thomas is that in God there are three persons, a fact learned through revelation. "In God essence is not really distinct from the person; and yet the persons are really distinguished from each other. For person ... signifies relation as subsisting in the divine nature. But relation as referred to the essence does not differ therefrom really, but only in our way of thinking; while as referred to an opposite relation, it has a real distinction by virtue of that opposition. Thus there are one essence and three persons."³¹

b) The Realization Method of Sankara

For Aquinas as for Aristotle the problem was the world of things out there. Hence their main concern was how we can understand things and talk about them. For Sankara, on the other hand, the problem was human bondage and suffering coming from our lack of self-understanding: Who am I and what are the causes of my suffering? . . . Sruti is the starting point of Sankara's system. The Srutis declare that reality is 'one-without-a-second'³² and that "everything is brahman"³³. Sankara's whole purpose is to lead one to the realization of the identity of the self with Brahman, as indicated by the Sruti "ahambrahmasmi - I am Brahman"³⁴. But the basic fact is that Brahman

29. Summa Theol. I, 13, 3

30. Summa Theol. I, 29, 3

31. Summa Theol. I, 39, 1

32. "Sadeva somya idamagrā sit, ekamevādvitīyam " Ch. Upanishad VI, ii, 1

33. "Sarvakhalvidam Brahma " Ch. Up. III, 14, 1

34. Ahambrahmasmi 'Brih Up. I, iv, 10

cannot really be comprehended, much less expressed. The eye cannot approach it, neither speech nor mind. We do not therefore know it, nor can we teach it. It is different from what is known and it is beyond what is known"³⁵. Consequently one who thinks he does not know may know it, and the one who thinks he knows does not know; unknown by the wise and known by the non-knowers.³⁶ So the first step towards realization of Brahman is apophatic. Interpreting the famous passage of the *Brhadaranyaka Up. "Neti, neti"* Sankara says: "Through these two terms 'not this' 'not this' it is sought to describe the Truth of Truth. By the elimination of all differences due to limiting adjuncts, the words refer to something that has no distinguishing mark such as name or form or action or heterogeneity, or species of qualities. Words denote things through one or other of these. Brahman has none of these distinguishing marks. Hence it cannot be described as 'It is such and such'... Brahman is described by means of name, form and action super-imposed on it in such terms as, 'knowledge, Bliss, Brahman' (3.9.28), 'pure intelligence' (2.4.12) etc. When however we wish to describe its true nature free from all differences due to limiting adjuncts, then it is an utter impossibility. Then there is only one way left, viz. To describe it as 'Not this, not this'³⁷.

Still, the Upanishads try to describe Brahman in positive terms. There are two kinds of definitions, one *svarupalakshana*, definition with reference to the essence, and the other *tathasthalakshana*, definition through accidents. In the case of Brahman the first kind of definition would be "Brahman is Truth, Knowledge and Infinitude" (*satyam*,) *jnanam anantam brahma*³⁸ "Brahman is knowledge and bliss" These different terms do not make a composite definition of Brahman as of an object out there, but each one of them makes a complete definition.. Thus 'satyam' means immutability and authenticity as opposed to 'anrta'. 'Anrtam' is of the contrary nature: *vikaro anrtam*. In the phenomenal sphere pot and other things made of clay are products and modifications of clay, which alone is the underlying reality.³⁹ Sankara views all things as emerging out of the one authentic and immutable really Real. Brahman is Atman, the Self of all. Ultimate Reality is not seen as

35. Katha Up. I,3

36. Katha Up.2.1

37. Brh.Ü.Bh. 2.3.6 trs. Madhavananda, Calcutta 1967

38. Taitt. Up. 2.1

39. TUB 2. 1. 1; similarly Ch.Up. 6.1.4 "*vācārambhanam vikāro nāmadheyam, mrttiketyeva satyam*" All products are due to words, a mere name; the clay alone is real.

an efficient cause out there, like the Yahweh of the Hebrews, creator of all things, nor like the Good of the Greeks a form of all forms. It is the maternal principle, the primeval energy before both being and non-being, from which all things evolved as manifestations of the One-alone-without-a-second. Here the phenomenon of consciousness is the best avenue of approach. In his introduction to the *Brahmasutrabhashya* Sankara starts with the contradiction in our consciousness between subject and object, the field of the 'I' and the field of the 'thou' and argues that only the Self can be real and the world of experience is falsely superimposed on it.⁴⁰ 'Jnanam' means knowledge or consciousness. Since it is mentioned along with 'satyam' and 'anantam', it is identical with Brahman. This means that Brahman is the very knowledge and not the knower. It does not imply agency but the pure state of consciousness."⁴¹ For if Brahman is 'jnanakarta', knower, it can never be really 'satyam' and 'anantam'. Agency implies change and if Brahman is the agent in the act of knowing, it will undergo change and thus will not be 'satyam'. Nor can Brahman be an object of knowledge, even self-knowledge, since as object of knowledge it would be inert. It is like the eye that can see everything but cannot see itself.⁴² So for Sankara Brahman is light shining by itself. The last word in the definition is *anantam*. We see that worldly knowledge is finite. So to remove this finitude the word 'anantam' is used⁴³ Brahman is infinite in all respects. No kind of finitude is possible in it.

Brahman is not only pure being and consciousness, but also bliss, *ananda*. Brahman as bliss is expressed in a significant way in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.7. 1. '*Raso vai sah*' Brahman is the essence. *Rasa* or essence has been identified with *ananda* or bliss. The idea of bliss follows from that of *sat* and *cit*. Brahman is pure existence and consciousness and hence independent, self-contained, and self-sufficient without the least taint of misery and unhappiness. Brahman is the eternally fulfilled and accomplished reality. It is the perfect reality and cannot be divested of its perfection. It is the infinite reality and therefore essentially bliss. Infinitude is bliss while finitude is limitation and misery. Here again Brahman is not treated as an object out there, either nirguna or saguna, but as the supposition and underlying ground of our consciousness. "Our entire action pre-supposes Brahman, which is *ananda*. The ultimate purpose of every action is bliss or happiness. No one does anything except for becoming happy. If there had not been the supreme

40. In Modern Philosophy Descartes also hits upon consciousness as the starting point of metaphysics: "Cogito, ergo sum" thus sharply differing from the Platonic and Aristotelian point of departure from 'wonder' at the phenomena of nature.

41. Taitt.Up., Bh. 2. 1. I.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

ananda, no one would have performed the action of inhaling and exhaling even."⁴⁴ Brahman is the pre-supposition and fountainhead of our bliss.

But the religious thinking of Sankara puts him in a metaphysical quandary. The apophatic approach of 'neti, neti' shows that Brahman is 'nirguna' devoid of all qualities and attributes. Religion on the other hand demands that Brahman is an object of devotion full of all auspicious qualities and therefore 'saguna'. When it is said that Brahman is being, consciousness and bliss, it should not be imagined that it is something with the qualities of being, knowledge and happiness. But it is reality itself, consciousness itself, and bliss itself. These characteristics do not adhere to Brahman as the gunas or qualities that adhere to and are supported by a substance. A quality is generally defined as something in another, whereas substance is that which exists in itself. Brahman is beyond the predicaments of substance, accidents and the like. It is nirguna, unqualified; "Brahman strictly taken is without all differences (*visesa*), attributes (*guna*), limitations (*upadhi*) and forms (*akara*)."⁴⁵ Sankara interpreting the words 'neti neti' of Brih.Up. 2.3.6 says: "Through these two terms 'neti neti' 'not this, not this' it is sought to describe the truth of truth (*satyasya satyam*). By the elimination of all differences due to limiting adjuncts the words refer to something that has no distinguishing marks such as name or form or action or heterogeneity or specificity or qualities. Words denote things through one or other of these. But Brahman has none of these distinguishing marks. Hence it cannot be described as 'It is such and such...' There is only one way left, viz. to describe it as 'not this nor this', by eliminating all possible specification of it that have been known."⁴⁶

Such a Brahman in common parlance may be said to be impersonal, since personality ordinarily implies distinction between self and non-self and consequently finitude.

Atman-Brahman- Another idea in Advaita, as important as that of Brahman is that of Atman. The Atman is Brahman. This is the truth the Advaitic metaphysicians have reached. Deussen says: "It seems to us especially a matter of question how the historical relation between Brahman and Atman, the two chief concepts on which Indian metaphysics grew and which already in the Upanishads, so far as we see, are used throughout as synonyms, is to be considered, whether the concept of Atman developed itself from that of Brahman through a mere sharpening of the subjective

44. Cf. TUB 2.7.1

45. P.Deussen, *The System of Vedanta*, p.204

46. Brh Up Bh.2.3.6

moment lying therein, or whether we have rather to distinguish between two streams, the one, more ecclesiastical which raised Brahman to a principle; the other more philosophical, which did the same for Atman, until both closely connected in their nature were led into a common bed".⁴⁷ The concept of Atman constitutes the core of Vedantic methodology: Instead of looking out there one looks inwards and one realizes that the only being, unchanging behind all the changes, the witness of all changes, the only thing that does not require proof is the Self. The only thing the existence of which cannot be doubted and depending on which everything exists is the self, which is of the nature of consciousness. If so, it naturally follows that this atman or self is Brahman. The atman is endowed with all the attributes with which Brahman is endowed according to Sruti. So atman itself is Brahman. Sankara says: "Is the Brahman which is to be investigated known or unknown? If it is known, we do not need to investigate it; if it is unknown, we cannot investigate it: Answer: That being which of its own nature is eternal, pure, wise, free, all-knowing, almighty is Brahman... But the existence of Brahman is demonstrated by the fact that it is the self (atman) of all. For everyone assumes the existence of himself, for he cannot say 'I am not'. For if the existence of Self were not obvious then all the world could say 'I am not' and the self is Brahman"⁴⁸

Nature of Human Bondage: According to Sankara the root of human bondage is confusion of the Atman or Self with the non-self.

The entire world phenomenon is the result of the super-imposition of the non-self on Self that is Brahman. So Brahman is not only the efficient cause of the world through his power of 'maya' but also the material cause, as the substratum on which the objective world of things is superimposed. Though the worlds of I and thou, subject and object are mutually opposed as day and night, "it is on the part of man a natural procedure, which has its cause in wrong knowledge, not to distinguish the two entities and their respective attributes although they are absolutely distinct but to superimpose upon each the characteristic nature and the attributes of the other, and thus coupling the Real and the Unreal, to make use of expressions such as 'that am I' and this is mine."⁴⁹

Saguna Brahman. Though Brahman is absolute and 'nirguna' for one in the state of bondage the Self is perceived through the experiential world which is really unreal. So from the part of experience one has to distinguish,

47. *System of Vedanta*, p. 49

48. Br. S.Bh 1, 1, 1.

49. B. S.Bh. Introd. SBE XXXIV, p. 3f.

as Mundaka Upanishad suggests, between *paravidya*, intuitive realization of Brahman indicated by the negation of attributes, and *aparavidya* as known through the various means of knowledge such as sacrifice, Scripture, meditation, and austerities. Apara Brahman is the same as nirguna Brahman taught as possessed of some distinct name, form etc. for the sake of worship. This saguna Brahman is the creator of all as taught by Sruti. Commenting on B.S. 1. 1.2 Sankara says "The origin etc. of a world possessing the attributes stated above cannot possibly proceed from anything else but a Lord possessing the stated qualities, not either from an unintelligent *pradhana* ... or from non-being". In looking for a purpose in creating the world, Sankara states that it is not to satisfy any need of Iswara but as 'leela', sport, as an overflow of divine reality, who is 'aptakama', one whose desires are all satisfied.⁵⁰ Iswara also preserves the creation both by maintaining it in existence through a continued act of creation, as well as by preserving its moral balance through divine appearance in the universe through *avatars* to protect the righteous and punish the wicked: He the Bhagavan appears to the world as though he is born and embodied.⁵¹ This Iswara in the form of *avatars* serves the purpose of worship. In Bh.G.Bh.12.5, Sankara distinguishes two kinds of Upasanas or worship: the upasana of the nirguna Brahman and that of saguna Brahman. The first type of devotion is difficult to achieve: "Great indeed is the trouble of those who are engaged in doing works for my sake - but greater still is the trouble of those who identify themselves with the imperishable and contemplate the supreme Reality". The liberation of the devotees of the nirguna Brahman is automatic, while that of the devotees of the saguna Brahman takes place by the grace of God. Every action has to be dedicated to Isvara, with the whole heart set on him. Every action has to be done as an offering to Bhagavan without attachment to its fruit. There should be complete dedication as that of a dutiful *servant* to his Lord.⁵²

Conclusion - The Two Approaches

When we compare the theological styles of Aquinas and Sankara what strikes everyone at the very outset is the different starting points of the two. Philosophers generally start from sense-experience. St. Thomas's starting point is the data of sense-experience. He analyzes the nature of the world and from this analysis he rises to the knowledge of God. He may or may not have been right in knowing exactly the physical nature of the world. In such matters St. Thomas follows the physicist. He says, "Matter itself cannot be

50. BhGBh 9. 10.

51. BGBH 3.37.

52. B.G.B. 3.30.

adequately known except through motion. Its investigation is the physicist's job, the philosopher should accept his findings."⁵³ St. Thomas starts from the physical world. Thence he will go to the metaphysical nature of the world and from there to God.

But Aquinas is a philosopher with a difference. He recognizes that philosophy with all its rational accuracy cannot determine the nature of God, as He is in Himself. Though it can arrive at the existence of God through reasoning it can say only what God is not rather than what actually God is. With regard to its ultimate object its procedure is dialectical, affirmation, negation and super-eminence. It can affirm that all the perfections found in creation are in God as in the ultimate cause. But it has then to deny that they are in the limited way that they are in the finite and created things. They are in God in a super-eminent way, of which reason can have no grasp. So God is shown as the final goal of the human intellect which humans naturally desire to grasp but cannot grasp by the natural powers of reason. So the only way that God can be attained is through the positive divine self-disclosure in Revelation. So Aquinas is a philosopher who by the compulsion of his philosophy ends up a theologian.

For Sankara the starting point is just the opposite. "With the Vedantins matters stand quite differently. The starting point with them is the Supreme, the Absolute. They determine first what the final, the infinite, the 'one *a se et per se*' is, and when they have started his attributes, they try to explain the world in function of Him - or of It - who is unlimited, independent and therefore unrelated."⁵⁴ Sankara starts from the position, 'Brahman is truth' - '*brahmasatyam*'. He concludes with the unreality of the world, and the self which is the only surest thing for Sankara is identified with Brahman, '*ayamatma brahma*', But Sankara is a theologian with a difference. Having started with the experience of Brahman as '*ekamevadvitiam*', One alone without a second, he is forced to maintain its unique reality against the emptiness-doctrine of Buddhism and the prakrti-purusha dualism of the Samkhya school. For this he has to have recourse to rational thinking. Vasudeva Kirtikar says: "Indian Vedanta, in its theory of knowledge proceeded with its search for truth by the method to which European thinkers could take no exception. It started with the self as the surest ground of certitude, for though everything else might be doubted, the doubter could

53. Comment. VII Metaphysics, lect.2

54. Dandoy, G. *An Essay on the Doctrine of the Unreality of the World in Advaita*, Calcutta, 1919, pp. 1-2

not doubt himself. Nowhere in ancient times was the 'Cogito, ergo sum' so well recognized in its correct form as in India. The Vedanta also recognized the position, that in every empiric cognition the self was invariably a necessary element and that such cognition always meant the synthesis of the self and not-self. It further recognized the fact that this not-self was none other than the self itself, externalized and appearing as conditioned by time and space and other relations of externality. And proceeding thus in its search, it discovered that the limitations to which both the individual self and the Self in Nature appeared subjected, could in course of human development - mental, ethical, religious and spiritual, be gradually sublated, so that eventually, the two might appear face to face, so to speak, in their true character, and recognize their identity - the result of such consummation being that All must be realized as Advaita one and non-dual."⁵⁵ So starting with the intuitive experience of the one Self of all Sankara comes to show that all knowledge has value only in relation to the knowledge of that One, knowing which everything else is known.

When we compare these two different approaches, it seems that St. Thomas's approach is more philosophical than that of Sankara. It is clear that all pure philosophies start from sense-data. Even idealistic philosophies actually start from sense-data. They may ultimately reduce the object of knowledge to the subject of knowledge. Even sceptic philosophies start from sense data at least by beginning to doubt the sense experience. In the methodological doubt of Descartes, after doubting everything, he comes to the truth of his own existence - "Cogito, ergo sum": I think, so I am! The fact is that only in terms of things outside it, can thought itself be known and understood by men in their present life. Thought and cognition are indeed known immediately but indirectly. Sankara may appear to start from sense-data. His Brahmasutrabhasya starts with the universal natural phenomenon of superimposition or *adhyasa*. But the point is that the ultimate pre-suppositions of Sankara are not sense-data. The *adhyasa* is a superimposition upon Brahman, a superimposition of non-self upon the self and vice versa. In this discussion, the sole reality of Brahman and the identity of the self with Brahman are supposed. These are definitely not objects of sense experience. Sankara's basis for the knowledge of Brahman is Sruti. Sruti comprises the Vedas, the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. These Srutis and even Smṛtis to a certain extent, according to Sankara have been experiences of rishis⁵⁶ So ultimately for Sankara also experience is the basis. Now could

55. Vasudeva Kirtikar, *Studies in Vedanta*, Bombay, 1924, p.61

56. B.S.B. 1.3.23

not this experience be equated with the experience on which St. Thomas bases his philosophy? And hence could both systems be placed on the same level? It seems that they cannot be so equated. The experience which is the basis for St. Thomas is a universal one. It is one which is experienced by all. Although the complete and exact physical nature of the world may not be known, still, everybody has the knowledge of the existence of the world, presented by the senses. But the supposed experience of the sages is certainly not universal. Even if they were authentic experiences, they will not be able to prove non-dualism. Because, though granting that the Advaitin had a real experience of the Advaitic position, viz., experiencing oneself as identical with Brahman, and the universe as vanishing there could be different interpretations of that experience.

Some would consider the Advaitic experience as a manic state, which could be produced by intoxicants. Thus Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception* explains how he took mescaline and how under its influence, he had an experience similar to those of the 'saccidananda-experience of the Hindus and beatific vision of Christianity'⁵⁷. The sadhanas for Advaitic experience will be then another substitute for mescaline.

There are some others who consider the Advaitic experience as an intermediary phase in the life of the mystic. Martin Buber in his book *Between Man and Man* describes the monistic experience he had and adds how he first imagined that in that experience he had attained a union with the Primal Being or the Godhead⁵⁸. The same is the case with Sri Aurobindo. He says: "I had the realization of sublime Nirvana first. There was complete *cittavrttinirodha*, entire silence. Then came the experience action, not my own, but from above."⁵⁹ Abhishiktananda alias Le Saux, thinks that the monistic experience is genuine mysticism but is a step lower than the Trinity experience of Christians. He says that "the Indian institution of *saccidananda* appears in truth to be the highest approach in human thought in the direction of the mystery of Trinity."⁶⁰ It is clear that in the face of such divergent interpretations it is extremely unconvincing to adduce the Advaitic experience as a proof for its metaphysical validity.

Again it seems that no one can communicate the perfect monistic experience. In case there is perfect identity with Brahman which is the sole reality, no *srutis* would have arisen. The question who communicates what to whom will definitely have to be met. The same is to be said even if

57. Cf. Zaehner R.C, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, London, 1967, p.5.

58. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947, pp.24, 25

59. Sri. Aurobindo *on Himself and on the Mother*, Pondicherry, 1953, p. 136

60. *Sagesse Hindoue, My stique Chretienne*, Paris, 1965, p.22

Sankara himself is supposed to be a *jivanmukta*. "Any experience of what the *jivanmukta* has, is still an experience of duality and it cannot prove monism. Any experience of monism, on the other hand, is experience of the dead. In other words perfect knowledge and life are incompatible. Either the *vidvan* has complete *vidya*; then he is Brahman, the world has altogether disappeared from his sight, he is completely released. But from this state there is no return. This *vidvan* therefore may have experience of pure monism, but he is no more with us, he can neither speak nor teach; if he has the experience, that experience is useless to us."⁶¹

Thus the Advaitic interpretation of the monistic experience, in any case seems to be unprovable. Even if we suppose the genuineness of such an experience, this experience which is the basis of Sankara's Advaita seems to be poles apart from the experience which St. Thomas makes the basis of his philosophy. The former experience is individual and private, if possible, whereas the latter is universal and common. It is evident that for philosophy, as we understand at present, the Thomistic type of experience is more acceptable than the Sankarite one.

Thus Sankara and Aquinas are both primarily theologians and at the same time great philosophers also. They present radically different styles. Aquinas goes from clearly provable experience of sense-data to the existence of a God who is the beginning before all beginning, independent pure Act on which all other acts are dependent, subsistent existence, infinite goodness and truth and the directive intelligence of all order in the world. But one can know what this God is in himself only through His self-disclosure through revelation, which again has to be properly interpreted according to the actual contexts in which it is made. It is a thoroughly human approach to theology. Sankara, on the other hand, starts from the intuitive experience of *rishis*, who put down their experience in human words and produced the Scriptures to help others to attain the same experience. The scope of philosophy is to show that humans can arrive at an experience of God only through the method of '*neti neti*' by denying the relevance of all worldly experience for knowing God. According to the *arundhatidarsananyaya*, the astronomer's method of pointing out to his students the star Arundhati, such denial by '*not so, not so*' and other *mahavakyas*, great statements of Scripture lead people to look inwards and realize God as the Self of one's own self. These two styles of theologizing are both valid and yet complementary.

St. George's Ashram
Palkulam, K. K.

61. Dandoy, op.cit. p. 64.

Christian Understanding of Religious Pluralism

Chacko Valiyaveettil

Fr. Chacko Valiyaveettil S.J. makes a survey of what the Church, especially the Asian Church has to say about her attitude and approach to religious pluralism. Starting from Vatican II which opened the door to all world religions and acknowledged whatever is true and holy in them, he proceeds to quote extensively from the FABC, especially from its Bishops Institute for Inter-religious Affairs (BIRA) in order to show how the Spirit works among the people of all religions. It is a call to Christian self-understanding and inter-religious dialogue which will lead to the creation of a society of justice and love and harmony.

From the early 1960s a significant change has been taking place in the attitude of the Catholic Church towards religious pluralism. This attitudinal change is not sufficiently known or recognized by most people including some Christians. Since the Second Vatican Council which called on the Christians 'to enter into dialogue and collaboration with people of other religions and to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods' found in these religions, there have been much reflection, study and research on the topic of interreligious dialogue and understanding among Christians. Asia, the cradle of the great religions of the world has a special responsibility to promote this religious understanding and harmony. In this article we shall make a survey of what the Church, specially the Asian Church, has to say about her attitude and approach to religious pluralism.

1. Riches of Religious Pluralism

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) in its Declaration on the relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions shows her appreciation of other religions and speaks of her commitment to foster unity and love among people of different faiths. This is what the Council says about Hinduism and Buddhism:

Thus in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical enquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our

condition through ascetical practices or deep meditation or a loving trusting flight toward God.

Buddhism in its multiple forms acknowledges the radical insufficiency of this shifting world. It teaches a path by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, can either reach a state of absolute freedom or supreme enlightenment by their own efforts or by higher assistance.¹

After acknowledging the riches of other religions the document continues:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.

The Church therefore, has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.²

The Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions which was set up in 1964 seeks to dissipate ignorance and prejudices specially among Catholics and to establish fruitful contact with members of other religions concerning questions of common interest.

Asia being the cradle of all great religions, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) had many meetings on the question of fostering dialogue and mutual understanding between different religions. About the attitude and approach of the Church to other religions FABC says:

In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the

1. Documents of Vatican II, Declaration of the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions para 2. (Walter M. Abbot (ed), London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966 pp. 661-2).

2. Ibid. pp. 662-3

authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?³

Inviting the local church to revere the great religious traditions of Asia the document continues:

Down through the centuries the ancient religions of the orient have given light and strength to our ancestors. They have expressed the noblest longings in the hearts of our people, our deepest joys and sorrows. Their temples have been the home of contemplation and prayer. They have shaped our history, and our way of thinking. They are part of our culture. For us in Asia, they have been the doorway to God.⁴

The Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) which is an organ of FABC, in its many meetings clearly speaks of God's saving grace and presence in all religions. Thus BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Nov. 1979) says:

Christians believe that God's saving will is at work in many different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again in the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace.⁵

Similarly BIRA IV/2 (Pattaya, Thailand, Nov. 1985) acknowledges that in the religions of Asia:

We find the values of the Kingdom - deep religiosity, prayer and contemplation - which are the sources of our own enrichment. We see, therefore, the Church as weakly emerging from self-centredness

3. FABC 1, Taipei, Taiwan, April 1974. (Cf. FOR ALL THE PEOPLES OF ASIA, Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991, edited by Gaudencio B. Rosales DD and C.G. Arevalo S.J., Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines, 1992 (hereafter FABC Doc.) p. 14.

4. Ibid. pp. 22.3.

5. FABC Doc. p. 115.

towards a maturity that urges her to reach out to all her brothers and sisters of other Christian churches, religions and peoples of good will in service and in love.⁶

Another assembly, BIRA IV/11 (Sukabumi, Indonesia, July 1988) sees religious pluralism as a source of richness and strength recognition of which leads to peace and harmony. It says:

Further, peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as 'live and let live'. The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness.⁷

2. God's Presence and Action in History

We can clearly discern the presence and action of God in all the religions. The documents on several occasions clearly affirm this fact. We shall give here a few examples.

The Second Vatican Council in its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions, in her task of fostering unity and love among people, speaking of what human beings have in common, says:

For all peoples comprise a single community, and have a single origin, since God made the whole race of men dwell over the entire face of the earth (cf. Acts 17 : 26). One also is their final goal: God. His providence, His manifestations of goodness and His saving designs extend to all men (cf. Wis. 8:1; Acts 14: 17; Rom. 2: 6-7; I Tim. 2: 4) against the day when the elect will be united in that Holy City ablaze with the splendor of God where the nations will walk in His light (cf. Apoc. 21: 23 f)⁸.

Being aware of the presence and working of the Spirit beyond the boundaries of the Church the Bishops (BIRA IV 3, Hongkong Nov. 1986) call for a stance of receptive pluralism:

The presence of the Holy Spirit in and beyond the Church in Asia may be perceived in a variety of ways. This is due in part, to the fact that people encounter the Spirit within their context, which is pluralistic in terms of religions, culture and world views. In this light we affirm a

6. *ibid.* p. 252

7. *ibid.* p. 321

8. Doc. Vat. II pp. 660-61

stance of *receptive pluralism*. That is, the many ways of responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit must be continually in conversation with one another. A relationship of dynamic tension may open the way for mutual information, inspiration, support and correction.⁹

Calling for a deeper understanding of the presence and working of the Spirit of God among the people of all religions, the same document says:

It is the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life and death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active amongst all peoples before the Incarnation and is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today. Clear signs of this presence of the Spirit amongst the living faiths of Asia are the living out of the moral code (patience, sincerity, respect etc.), innate humaneness, the common concern to alleviate hunger and poverty, and the intense desire for world peace with justice.¹⁰

3. Christian Self-understanding

God's presence and action in history and God's will that all peoples be saved and attain their final destiny of union or oneness with God is seen by the Christian in relation to Jesus Christ. It is in and through the incarnation of the Son of God that the Triune God saves the world. All the people who lead an upright life following the dictates of their conscience participate in this salvation. This is clearly stated by the Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) which is an exposition of the Christian understanding of the relationship of the Church to the world today:

For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.

As an innocent lamb He merited life for us by the free shedding of his own blood. In Him God reconciled us to Himself and among ourselves. From bondage to the devil and sin, He delivered us so that each one of us can say with the Apostle: The Son of God 'loved me and gave himself up for me' (Gal. 2: 20). By suffering for us He not only provided us with an example for our imitation. He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning...

9. FABC. Doc. P. 261.

10. *ibid.* p. 259.

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.¹¹

The Christian is also called upon to be conscious of the positive role of other religions in God's plan of salvation and hence the need of entering into dialogue and collaboration with them. At a meeting held in Madras (BIRA III, Nov. 1982) to reflect over the urgency, problems and prospects of dialogue between Hindus and Christians in Asia, the participants expressed the self-understanding of the Christian in relation to other religions in the following terms:

God, the Father of all, has called upon all men to share in his life and love through His Son Jesus Christ. The risen Christ and His Spirit are active in the world making this love a present and growing reality, making all things new. This same love urges us on to dialogue with people of other religions, because we have, especially since the Second Vatican Council, an increasing awareness of the positive role of other religions in God's plan of salvation.¹²

With the people of all religions the Christians see themselves as a pilgrim people on their journey towards the final destiny of oneness or union with God. At the same time they are aware of the call to be God's eschatological people who have received the final Word and fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ. BIRA III (Madras 1982) continues to say:

The Church as the Sacrament of union with God and of the unity of all humankind has the mission to promote in various ways the fulfillment which is God's will and gift for all persons in Christ. Dialogue is an integral part of this mission. As God's pilgrim people, the Church shares the longings and the desires of all to come to the Father, while as God's eschatological people, it announces Jesus Christ and His Good News to all and calls them to radical conversion and commitment to God in total self-surrender and to belong to the community of Jesus in his Church.¹³

We have seen that God's Spirit is at work in all religions and among all people. The Christian sees the working of the Spirit in relation to Jesus

11. *Gaudium et Spes* para 22. Doc. Vat. II pp 220-22

12. FABC. Doc. p. 119

13. *ibid.* p. 120

Christ and his saving mission. Jesus came into this world to reveal to us the unfathomable love of the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit. Jesus accomplishes this mission through his life and teaching and ultimately through the paschal mystery of his suffering, death and resurrection. He had promised to be with us till the end of the world and as the glorified and risen Lord he continues to be present with us and inspires and guides us through his Spirit. BIRA IV/3, (Hong Kong, Nov. 1986) brings this out in the following statement:

We affirm any effort towards an experience of immediate access to the Spirit has to be seen in relation to Jesus Christ to whom the Spirit bears witness. What is done in the name of the Holy Spirit must be in keeping with the life, teachings and mission of Jesus Christ. Christ promised his disciples to send the Holy Spirit as their Counsellor, Intercessor and Advocate. What the Spirit does, and continues to do, is inseparable from what Christ said and did.¹⁴

This presence and action of the Spirit is not confined to the visible boundaries of the Church but extends beyond it to people of other faiths. The criteria for discerning this presence are the fruits of the Spirit as expressed in the same statement of BIRA IV/3:

We affirm that the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5: 22-3), love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, should be our constant guides in discerning the presence of the Spirit. They embody the values of the reign of God of which the Church is the visible sign. Any exercise of the gifts of the Spirit may be seen as legitimate if it bears the fruits of the Spirit.¹⁵

4. Call to Dialogue

Interreligious dialogue is essential in our world today for our very survival. As Hans Kung, a great present-day theologian, says, 'there cannot be peace between nations unless there is peace between religions'. Religions are a powerful force which can cause division and fragmentation or bring about peace and harmony. We are aware of the terror and destruction unleashed by religious fundamentalism and fanaticism, particularly in Asian countries. Hence the imperative need for interreligious dialogue. BIRA IV/11 (July 1988. Sukabumi, Indonesia) which was reflecting on the need of developing a Theology of Harmony, in its final statement says:

Finally, given the fact that religions in Asia are a powerful force, having a hold over the consciences of people and permeating every

14. FABC. Doc. p. 260.

15. *ibidem*.

form of social life, they can contribute to weld together peoples and nations or cause division and fragmentation. Therefore a heavy responsibility is laid on all religions to dialogue with each other. Peace, harmony, fellowship and co-operation, among religions seem to be a sure way for peace and harmony in our Asian Societies.¹⁶

God is continually in dialogue with the world and with humans through creation and through the Word. The Christian sees in Jesus Christ the fullest expression of this dialogue, communicating God's life and love and reconciling all people to God and with one another. It is the task of every human being to continue this dialogue initiated by God and to build up God's Kingdom which is a Kingdom of justice, love and peace. The International Congress on Mission (Manila, Dec. 1979) reflecting on this motivation for interreligious dialogue says:

God is present and working through the Spirit in the whole of creation and the Christian, together with men of all faiths, strives to discover this transforming love of God and makes it a more living experience. Through dialogue, the Christian grows in awareness of his partnership with God in the coming about of the Kingdom. The history of salvation tells us that God is continuously dialoguing with men. Christ is the center of this process. As disciples of Christ, within His community, the Church, we are called to imitate Him. Christ has come to do the will of the Father. As the Father has sent Christ, so the Christian is sent by Christ to bring the Good News, in the same way, to all men.¹⁷

One of the pre-requisites for dialogue to be fruitful is that each participant comes to dialogue with an open mind, without prejudices and with readiness to listen and to learn from the other and be enriched by the truths, values and insights present in the other's tradition. BIRA IV/12 (Hua Hin, Thailand, Feb. 1991) brings this out clearly:

Transparency and utter truthfulness demand that there be no 'hidden agenda', that no betrayal or indelicate behaviour trespass upon this sacred ground, that there be no manipulation of any kind. Welcome is vulnerability to the demands of truth, pleasant or unpleasant. The freedom to enter or to withdraw, to appreciate or even honestly to dissent - these too contribute to the growth of a culture of dialogue.¹⁸

It is also necessary that one should be rooted in one's own faith while being open to the faith commitment of the other. BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay City,

16. FABC Doc. p. 321

17. FABC Doc. pp. 141-42

18. FABC Doc. p. 332

Philippines, Nov. 1988) while speaking about the Christian's commitment to Christ says:

While firmly adhering to our commitment to Christ, it is indispensable for dialogue that we enter into the religious universe of our dialogue partner and see his or her sincere and unflinching faith-commitment. More than that, we should appreciate the commitment of the other. We have no right to judge the commitment of the other since faith is the expression of the encounter of the infinitely open human spirit with the unfathomable mystery of God. This is why listening attentively with our heart to the personal commitment of faith and witness of the other partner can not only facilitate dialogue, but also enrich us and make us grow in our faith, and help us to reinterpret it.¹⁹

Interreligious dialogue is not to be restricted to the intellectual level only, but must take place in every sphere of life. We may distinguish four levels of dialogue: dialogue of life, of action, of theological or intellectual exchange and finally spiritual. In dialogue of life people of different faiths live in an open and neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, problems and preoccupations of daily life. In dialogue of action people go a step further to collaborate, to solve common problems and work for the integral development of the community. Then we have formal dialogue which may be called the dialogue of intellectual or theological exchange where the dialogue partners strive to understand and appreciate each other's faith, leading to mutual enrichment. Apparently irreconcilable differences on the level of intellectual understanding need not deter us from dialogue. Speaking of the dialogue between Christians and Muslims, which applies also to dialogue between people of other faiths, BIRA II, (Kuala Lumpur Nov. 1979) says:

Scholarly dialogue also has a special role. In this work the real differences which exist between Christianity and Islam must be acknowledged, but these differences must not be exaggerated or distorted. This attempt to clarify misunderstandings and to delineate the areas of convergence and divergence between Christianity and Islam is a goal of formal, theological dialogue. Irreconcilable theological differences need never be an obstacle to dialogue.²⁰

In the dialogue of religious experience, which is a dialogue in depth, the participants go beyond the differences of the intellectual level and meet in the level of the spirit. It is the experience of the Ultimate Reality which we call

19. *ibid.* p. 310

20. *ibid.* p. 16

the Absolute, Brahman, God, Tathata, Tao etc. where we all ultimately meet. BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Nov. 1979) reflecting over the urgency, problems and prospects of dialogue between Hindus and Christians in Asia, has the following to say about this dialogue in the level of spiritual experience:

Hinduism has a sense of God in all things. Its basic experience is that of *advaita* which is the unity of all things in the Absolute. While the Christian tradition also has the dimension of interiority and of God's immanent presence in all things created, yet what stands out more prominently in the Christian experience is a personal encounter with God in terms of love and commitment. A dialogue will lead to deepening and fostering together the values of interiority, silence, love and communion.²¹

5. Towards a Society of Justice and Love

Dialogue and understanding among people of different faiths must lead to the creation of a society of justice and peace. When dialogue goes beyond the level of intellectual and religious exchange and penetrates into all strata of society we can expect rich fruits of mutual understanding, harmony, love and peace. Reflecting on the mission of the Church the Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA II, Trivandrum, Nov. 1980) says:

We would wish to see interreligious dialogue become a reality at the grassroots level of our Churches through greater openness and reaching out of all their members towards their brothers and sisters of other religious traditions. Interreligious dialogue should not be limited to mutual sharing of religious experience; we must also learn to address ourselves together and out of our respective religious convictions to the furtherance of human values and concerns. While the Church is the visible sign of the presence of Jesus Christ and his Spirit in the world, we believe that the same mystery is also present beyond the boundaries of the Church community and that our non-Christian brethren in ways unknown to us also relate to the mystery of the Church.²²

Special care is to be taken by people of all faiths towards the service of the poor and for the liberation of the oppressed and the exploited. Reflecting on the need of such co-operation BIRA IV/II (Sukabumi, Indonesia, July, 1988) says:

In actual practice all this may entail that the believers of all religions take up the cause of the least: the oppressed, the exploited, and the

21. *ibid.* p. 122

22. *ibid.* p. 101

discriminated minority groups. Further, peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity.²³

We are aware of the evils of caste, communalism, violence, corruption etc. rampant in the society. Ideals like truth and non-violence, which were so dear to the father of our Nation, are present in all religions. By mutual co-operation of the people of different faiths these ideals can be realised in the society and all the evils eradicated. There are already action groups working for this cause. Believers of all religions are called to join hands with such movements, and guide them in the right direction for the creation of a just society where the fundamental human rights are respected. BIRA III (Madras, 1982) recommends such collaboration:

Common action for the promotion of integral human values like freedom, equality, fellowship and justice leading to peace and for the eradication of social evils like caste, communalism, corruption and the exploitation of the weak can be promoted. Christians should be encouraged to join, both as persons and as institutions, existing movements for the building up of a fuller human life in community or even initiate such action leading to a common consciousness for the promotion of fundamental human values and the defence of rights.²⁴

The Christians in many countries have formed what are called Base Christian Communities which have proved very effective in bringing about mutual understanding, peace and harmony in the society. Such groups are working very successfully in Brazil and in other countries including India. This experience of the Christians encourages them to enter into partnership with believers in other religions and form Base Human communities. People belonging to such groups will come very close to each other in sharing their religious experience, in their mutual understanding and love, and they can become powerful instruments for the transformation of society. We quote here two documents which recommend such collaboration:

The recent experience of 'base Christian communities' has unearthed their vast apostolic potential and the rich promise they hold. They can play a creative role in interreligious dialogue. They can enter into partnership with groups and organizations belonging to the people of other religions. (BIRA IV/12, Hua Hin, 1991)²⁵.

23. *ibid.* p. 321

24. *ibid.* p. 123

25. *ibid.* p. 328

The formation of Basic Christian Communities, which are self-reliant, should lead to the formation of Basic Human Communities. In this way, the Church of Asia can truly become servant of all. (BIRA IV/2, Pattaya, Thailand, Nov. 1985)²⁶.

We may end these reflections by referring once again to the call for Interreligious Harmony voiced by BIRA IV/11 (Sukabumi, Indonesia, 1988):

Finally, given the fact that religions in Asia are a powerful force having a hold over the consciences of people and permeating every realm of societal life, they can contribute to weld together peoples and nations or cause division and fragmentation. Therefore a heavy responsibility is laid on all religions to dialogue with each other. Peace, harmony, fellowship and co-operation among religions seem to be a sure way for peace and harmony in our Asian societies.²⁷

Christanand
Kanyakumari.

26. *ibid.* p. 254

27. *ibid.* p. 321

Primal Religions

V. Johnson

Fr. V. Johnson C.M.I. of Poornodaya Centre tries to show that religion has been an essential element in every culture and it dates back to all known people, both historic and pre-historic. Primal religions ante-date all world religions and they still persist. We all need to have a pan-religious outlook.

Cultural Constant

Religion is a constant factor in all known human societies. Analysis of the human societies proves the same. The oldest known Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon men had religious practices. Archaeological evidences pin point elaborate ritual treatment of the dead, going back to 100,000 years. Ample proofs about the persistence of religion are available on the cultures of written traditions. As Collins states, "at the dawn of recorded history, the first written records (c. 3500 B.C.) of the Sumerians demonstrate religion occupying a very important place in the lives of people"¹. Thus religion is an element of every culture.

Culture is an abstraction of a number of constitutive elements; mainly the social, economic, political, legal, and religious systems along with the family, marriage, and kinship traditions. All the different units in a culture are well integrated and configured. The interrelated elements are functionally associated with one another. Thus a specific pattern of beliefs and behaviour is formed. Religion is the soft and sensitive core of a culture. It renders relevance to the presence of the self, others, the Ultimate and the cosmos at large. Religion indicates the roles of individuals and their destinies. It deals with the issues of origin and development of the universe. In short it is a meaningful system, directing and guiding people.

One of the earliest social scientists who studied cultural phenomenon is Tylor. He wrote the *Primitive Culture* in 1871. Ever since this publication, no anthropologist has ever reported a human community bereft of religion. In other words, anthropologists have yet to find out a human group devoid of religion. One may possibly say that religious behaviour existed with the very presence of human beings on earth.

1. John J Collins, *Primitive Religion* (New Jersey: Little field, Adams & Co. 1978), p. 7

Primal Versus Universal Religions

In sequence, the primal religions are prior to the world religions. The primal religions are limited to the respective communities and they recognise religious habits of other communities. Most of the primal religions are still existing in oral traditions. Their founders are seldom remembered. But the religious functionaries and leaders have handed down the essence of their religion by word of mouth. Myths, stories, riddles, folk songs, and dances embody religious norms and values. During festivals and celebrations the legends are narrated; thereby the members become conscious about their origin, obligations, rights, duties and destinies. Questions about the ultimate, problem of evil, interaction with the spirits etc. are explained through a face to face relationship.

Living in the lap of nature the tribals sense the mysterious powers. Turner states, "they readily become aware that an invisible, more-than-human power surrounds them and develop their own religious system to forge links with this power. The religions of tribal peoples are therefore linked with real human needs and have the hallmarks of true religion. They have a realistic view of life, a humble view of human nature and a sense of depending on the spirit world".² For all practical purposes primal cultures are applied religions. Religion is the underlying theme of their social actions.

Primal Spirituality

A Toda of Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu begins the day by saluting the sun with 'kaimukti'. He then turns to milking the buffaloes in the sacred dairy. The Todas regard sacred dairy as a temple and use formula of prayers while milking. Thus their daily activities are punctuated by religion. The Spirit is omnipresent in the case of the Birhor of Chotanagpur. The spirit is in the mountains, waters, rocks and trees. Therefore they pay homage to them all. Thus the Birhors live out their religion every day; there is no separation of activities like that of the non-tribals. The non-tribals limit their religious behaviour to rituals; The tribals consider their laws and customs as sanctioned by the spirits. Religion is at the foundation of all their activities.

Analysing the basic characteristics of the tribals, Kullu observes that "all these characters are centred round an anti-greed and an anti-pride ethos"³. Greed and pride are considered by tribals as capital sins. Because in primordial

2. Harold Turner, "World of Spirits" in Harold Turner et al (eds) *The World's Religions* (Oxford: Lion Publishers, reprint 1992) p. 129

3. Paulus Kullu, "Tribal Religion and Culture" *Jeevadhara*, XXIV, 140 (March 1994) p. 92

times, these sins have caused death and destruction. Their myths of Flood and Rain of Fire and the Sosobonga have taught them to avoid these sins. The contrast can be observed among the non-tribals who are led by greed and pride. The difference in perspective is clear from the reply of tribal Chief Seattle in 1855, when president Franklin Pierce wanted to buy the tribal land. Chief Seattle remarked, "How can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect, all are holy in the memory and experience of my people".⁴ The land is sacred and holy in the tribal world-view. The nature itself is the temple of the Ultimate. This is the foundation of primal spirituality. However, in the light of evolution, many scholars tried to search for the roots of primal religions.

Origins of Primal Religions

E.B. Tylor was the first to propose a theory on the origins of primal religions. It is known as animism. He defined animism as "belief in spiritual beings". Both the animate and inanimate beings were attributed with various kinds of spirits. Animism emerged out of the various enquiries and explanations made on the conditions of the body at different states like walking, sleeping, dreaming, trance, vision and disease. Norbeck says, "Pondering on these things, primitive philosophers developed the idea of a soul separable from the body as the source of life and the cause of sleep and unconscious states".⁵

Tylor's theory of animism was based on two assumptions. The first one was the linear evolution. Living at a time when all scientists were taken up by the theory of evolution, Tylor took it for granted without questioning. Hence, the presupposition was that the present day religion was a natural outgrowth of prior states and the origins will explain a theory valid for all religions. Moreover, the stages of evolution set were from animism to polytheism and finally leading to monotheism. The second assumption was on the ultra rationalism. That the content of beliefs and practices are rationally connected. Unquestioned acceptance of these assumptions slowly brought out the inadequacies of the theory of animism.

4. Quoted by Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance* (New Delhi: Viva Books 1993) p. 259

5. Edward Norbeck, *Religion in Primitive Society* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers. 1961), p. 17

Barely a generation afterwards, Tylor's theory faced severe criticism from a number of scholars. As Evans Pritchard pointed out, "It is a remarkable fact that none of the anthropologists whose theories about primitive religion have been most influential had ever been near a primitive people. It is as though a chemist had never thought it necessary to enter a laboratory".⁶ Consequently their conclusions were to be re-examined in course of time.

When Tylor over emphasised evolution and rationalism, he lost sight of an important dimension of primal religion, namely, magic. The role of magic was brought out by Frazer's classical work, the *Golden Bough*. Marett too supported it and postulated a pre-animistic state. Belief in magic was a form of thought preceding rational thought has been generally accepted. Later investigators realised the complexity of concentrating on the origins of primal religions. Eventually they turned to the psychological and functional theories of religion.

In India, Ghurye formulated a grand proposition about the tribals. His conclusion was based on the study of various Census books of the British and on the secondary data. The British Census Commissioners of those days had an arbitrary way of making distinctions about various religions. So the primal religions were first termed as 'animists' and later as 'tribal religion' etc. from time to time. According to Roy Burman, "Mainly reacting positively and negatively to the views of the Census officers in a selective manner, Ghurye concluded that "the so-called aboriginals who form the bulk of the Scheduled Tribes, and have been designated in the Censuses as Animists are best described as Backward Hindus". Ghurye did not make an analytical appraisal of Hinduism or of the diverse religious practices and cosmologies and theologies prevalent at the folk level including those among the tribals before coming to his conclusion. Nationalist highbrowism is not the answer to colonial highbrowism. Ghurye unfortunately could not escape the trap".⁷ There is a lot of complexity involved in the serious study of primal religion. This is because man's imaginative and emotional life has been highly colourful, creative and complex.

Beyond Ethnocentrism

Often what stands in the way of understanding the primal religions from within is the ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the consideration of one's

6. Evans Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: University Press, Reprint 1977), p. 6

7. B. K. Roy Burman, *Tribes in Perspective* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications 1994), pp. 57-58

own culture as the best and the standard. Other cultures are judged with the norms and values of a culture in which one is born and brought up. Such prejudices and pre-judgements prevent an objective approach to reality. All people are ethnocentric in some degree. But if conscious, a better understanding of reality can be obtained. Nehru once said, "I am getting a little alarmed when I see not only in this country, but in other countries, great countries, how people are anxious and keen to make others according to their own image and likeness, and impose, this way of living or that way of living".⁸ This can be avoided only when a person critically evaluates the limitations and constraints of one's own culture.

Much ethnocentric feelings revolve the term, primitive, aboriginal, animistic, savage, heathen, ethnic etc. Thus viewing people from an inferior status. A lot of writings on primal religions until recently has reflected this view. But it has no scientific basis or support. Norbeck states, "the most luxuriant growth of ethnocentrism revolves about religion. In the history of the West, this attitude has been the rule rather than the exception".⁹ This is true about a lion's share of the writings of non-tribal scholars on tribal religions in India.

Emergence of Tribal Scholars

Recently there is an emergence of tribal scholars. They have started questioning the assumptions and conclusions of the non-tribals. Their reflections and articulations are firmly rooted in their experience. Theirs is an inside perspective of the primal society. One such illustration is by Sema; himself a tribal, has reacted to the distorted depiction of their religion as animism by the well known author Risley. Sema observes "that which we think most unscientific could have been dependable science for the primitive man in solving his life's problems. The mystery of human psyche is unexplainable by mere rational means".¹⁰ Tribals in their peculiar ecological settings have found out ways and means of coping with the reality. These may seem to be unscientific or irrelevant for outsiders. At the same time, these are very important for them. The variety and diversity of human cultures thus embellish humanity.

Another insider's view is provided by Kullu. Reflecting on his own tribal heritage, he observes that non-tribals depict tribal culture and religion with

8. Quoted by K. S. Singh (ed), *Our Tribal Heritage* (Ranchi: The National Tribal Commission 1989), p. 6

9. Norbeck, p. 9

10. Quoted by Roy Burman, p. 172

their prejudices. They do not give a real and objective picture about the tribals. Even today quite many writers are still labouring hard to prove that tribals are backward communities, their religion and culture are superficial imitations. Kullu raises an important issue: "The question here would be whether such authors will ever begin seeing things from the opposite direction, namely, will they ever accept the fact that tribal elements are the original; so that the roots of modern Indian religions, cultures, languages, political systems etc. are to be found among tribals?".¹¹

Persistence of Primal Religions

In spite of the contact with other religions, as a whole, primal religions have kept up their traditions. Many elements are as alive, even vigorous. It has still upheld their identity as a people. Singh has found that "It (tribal religion) has maintained its system of religious beliefs and practices including propitiation of spirits, magic and witchcraft and the priesthood. Recent trends even suggest revival of many pristine elements of tribal religion by those who have gone out of its fold".¹² Persistence, revitalisation, revival and re-assertions are going on from time to time in primal communities. A clear instance of such a movement is the re-assertion of Gondi or Koya religion in Central India, the former kingdom of Gondwana. Recently there was an attempt to bring together all the scattered knowledge and vision about the Gondi religion in a book form. It is entitled *Gondi Dharma Darshan*, written by Motiram Kankali.¹³ The salient features of Gondi religion according to the above work can be summarised as follows.

Gondi Dharma

Initiated by Pari Kupa Lingo, Gondi Dharma is the ancient religion of the Gonds. Their religion has survived several onslaughts unleashed by other major world religions. They are convinced that their religion is best suited to their socio-cultural and ecological milieu. In the beginning, when the Gonds were fighting among themselves for supremacy, Guru Lingo divided them into different clans; and gave norms for their intermarriage. Accordingly marriages are with the number of gods different from one's own. Endogamy is not permitted within the clan. Within the clan, all are considered as brothers

11. Kullu, p. 89

12. K. S. Singh in Foreward to *Census of India* by J.H. Hutton, Vol 1, (Delhi Gian Publishing House, 1931 Reprint 1989), p. iii

13. Motiram Kankali *Gondi Dharma Darshan* (in Hindi, Nagpur Gondwana Vikas Mandal, 1989)

and sisters belonging to the same ancestor. Hence marriage is outside the clan and within the tribal community.

Lingo has understood the functioning of the cosmos and the various forces therein. These forces are basically opposite but complementary and are termed as *sallang* and *gaagra*. They are the plus and minus principles of the universe. The world is moving due to the above forces. Marriage is also based on the same principles. Lingo has divided the entire Gonds into 750 clans. For each clan he had given one animal, one bird and a tree or a shrub as their identification mark. Thus there are 2250 beings in nature which are taken care of as well as preferentially consumed keeping the optimal balance in nature.

The supreme aim of religious practice is the welfare of all. Hence the spirit of service is given more importance. The individual would not count much; it is the community that gains predominance. The communitarian aspects of sharing of meals, participation of all in singing and dancing are practised among them. Lingo had taught the disciples to be honest, straight forward, to speak truth and above all treat others well by generous hospitality. To enculturate the up and coming generation, Lingo had instituted the Ghotul system of holistic training and education imparted from the third year of a child upto marriage. In the Ghotul all were taught about the tribal traditions, legends, songs and dances. Their music and dances were both for worship and relaxation. They were made fit and competent adults for the community. Thus the Gonds are proud of their identity and the values associated with the living of a vibrant and dynamic community. Their simple way of living, symbiosis with the local ecology, communitarian sharing, joy and happiness expressed through music and dance, mutual help and concern etc. are real expressions of an authentic culture.

Cultural to Religious Pluralism

People of different faiths accept the phenomenon of cultural pluralism. However, many refuse to perceive that cultural pluralism results in religious pluralism. Analysis of any ancient society indicates the prevalence and persistence of religion. More than the modern world religions, primal religions were open to the acceptance and recognition of other faiths and persuasions. As Collins remarks, "the human species is unique in interacting with a world beyond that of physical and social environments: the realm of unseen beings, power and events".¹⁴ Hence dialogue and openness to other religions will enrich the total human heritage and vision.

14. Collins, p. 8

Pan Religious Perspective

Human beings have developed rich spiritual resources from their appearance on earth upto the present times. But this spiritual heritage is unnoticed and ignored by people of other faiths. Some are afraid of opening themselves to multiple faiths. In the present day context where improved means of communication and transport bring people together into the global village, there is an inherent tendency to enrich and deepen one's own faith through a pan religious outlook. Primal religions with their diverse outlook and cultures can certainly enhance the spiritual heritage of humankind, provided we learn from the book of nature. That is the prayer of an Onondaga tribal: "O Great Spirit, whose breath gives life to the world and whose voice is heard in the soft breeze... make us wise so that we may understand what you have taught us, help us learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock, make us always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes, so when life fades, as the fading sun set, our spirits may come to you without shame."¹⁵

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15. Quoted by Al Gore, p .259

The Ideals of Life in Thiru Kural

Dhanaraj

Fr. Dhanaraj S.J. writes about *Thiru Kural* of Thiru Valluvar, the famous Tamil poet. Though the work deals with morals, it is the only Tamil literary work that has influenced all the later Tamil literature. It is a work of enduring value and exquisite beauty. Its teaching is so humane and holistic in its outlook that several religions, including Christianity claim its author to be their adherent.

At Kanyakumari, a 133 feet high statue of Thiru Valluvar is installed. Valluvar is one of the most illustrious poets of Tamil literature. The 133 feet represents 133 chapters in *Thiru Kural*, his most glorious work.

Thiru Kural is an ethical work, though it does not prescribe do-s and don'ts like any other book of morals. It is the philosophy of life dealt with in literature of high quality. As such its attraction is very great. It is the only ancient literature which has influenced all the other subsequent literary works and continues to influence even literature of today.

Thiru Kural consists of 1330 couplets, without any match to it before or after its composition. It contains the wisdom and consciousness of life as dreamt of by the Tamils. The work is divided into 3 parts with an introduction. It has 133 chapters and each consists of 10 couplets.

The Introduction of Kural

In the introductory part of *Thiru Kural* we have four chapters: invocation, the importance of rain, the glory of the ascetics and the essence of morality.

The book begins with a description of God and the effects of man's relationship with Him. God is the first cause and source of all beings. The purpose of education is to realise God and worship Him. Only those who serve God will live for ever, remove all worries, free themselves of all bondage and attain the goal of life. God described here is not a sectarian God but universal God who will be acceptable to all believers whatever religion one belongs to. As a matter of fact, several religions claim ownership of *Thiru Kural*. Thiru Valluvar is claimed to be a Buddhist by some, a Jain by some others, a Saivite by yet others. And even certain Christians have claimed that Thiru Valluvar was a Christian!

The second section of the introduction deals with the importance of rain and the third with the glories of one who has renounced everything. This

chapter describes the characteristics of the ascetic and implies that the ideal of human life may be easily attained only by ascetics. Hence he is held as one peerless, capable of great achievements and one who has understood the purpose of life on earth.

The final section of the introduction defines morality. Morality is defined as the attainment of purity of heart. Translated freely it is "To become pure of heart is all morality. The rest does not matter"(34). For Valluvar, morality is neither ritual purity, nor merely sexual purity. It is much more comprehensive and ultimately it is fulness of love and so freedom from all that would tarnish love such as greed, avarice etc. Overcoming greed, jealousy, anger and harsh words is the manifestation of morality. 'Real happiness comes only through morality; all the rest is external and inglorious'(39) says Valluvar. Such a vision embraces all humanity transcending caste, creed, nationality and culture. it is universal. Hence morality is freed from all rituals.

Ideals of Life

The first part of Thiru Kural deals with virtue, the virtue of the house holder and of the ascetic and the divine ordinance. The second part deals with worldly affairs, such as wealth, government and all the other good and bad characteristics of the human. The third part delineates the life of love. Thus Thiru Kural depicts the ideals of life in every sphere. *To become divine is the human end.* It is the belief of Thiru Kural that if one lives rightly, he will become a god. It also implies that one should live in such a way as to be a god! This, in short, is the general ideal of Thiru Kural:. It may be rendered as: 'one who lives properly on earth will be considered a god in heaven (50).

Married Life

What is the ideal of married life? To look after the stranger, the traveller, to provide him/her with all the necessities of life is the ideal of married life! It is a life which goes outward for the welfare of others. Such a person lives only to look after others. Such a life is in fact a heavenly life (86), says Thiru Kural. "Sudhdhananda Bharathi translates it as 'Who tends a guest and looks for next is a welcome guest in heaven's feast". The one reason why someone gets married and possesses a home, or the very purpose of married life, thus, is to look after the needy. "Men set up home, toil and earn, To tend the guests and do good in turn (81)". The phrase *Velanmai seithal* is an agricultural term, meaning cultivating the land. The cultivation here is caring for the needy. The nature of marriage is to love and to be blameless. This is the essence of marriage. Actually these are interior to the person contracting marriage. The fruit of marriage is noble children. Sex and childbirth do not

enter into the essence of the picture. Love and a blameless life constitute the purpose of married life!

The virtues of the householder are many. After defining marriage, the poet goes on to state that it is not good for man / woman to live alone. Helpmate is a need. The wealth of children, loving kindness, hospitality, courteous speech, gratitude, equity, self-control, decorum, forgiveness, duty to the society, fear of sin, charity and renown are the virtues of domestic life. Coveting other's wife, envy, slander and vain speech are to be avoided.

Life of renunciation

If caring for the needy is the purpose of the married life, the life of renunciation is to strive after compassion. It is born of wisdom. The wise man is one who attains compassion. Compassion is tenderly caring not only for human beings in need but for all living beings. Even fools possess earthly goods, but the wise, one who has renounced everything should possess compassion (241).

The virtues of the ascetics are many. Compassion is the essence of his striving. As a corollary he is to avoid eating meat and killing. Sins to be avoided are imposture, fraud, anger, and violence. He should practise penance mainly because the world and worldly things are fleeting in nature. As a result of renunciation he should attain the Truth. The Truth, of course, is God. Hence realisation of God is the aim of the ascetics; for that matter it is the aim of life on earth for anyone. As a precaution he should shun all desires.

Though these virtues are common to any human being, the ascetic should practise them par excellence. As for example, according to Sudhdhananda Bhrathi's translation, "Save thy soul from burning ire Though tortured like the touch of fire" (308). The translation has not brought out all the nuances of the couplet. It means that even if one is fried in a steady fire, it is better not to get angry, if possible. Another ideal for the ascetic is this: "Any, anywhere injure not, At any time even in thought" (317). Or better 'don't even think anything which is ignoble to anyone; at any time; even very slightly'. Such an ideal is next to impossible, but recommended to the ascetic.

Literary Beauty

If such is the high teaching of Kural, its literary beauty is enthralling. Nobody expects literary charm in an ethical work. But Kural is immortal partly through its literary charm. To cite an example or two is worthwhile. Dealing with the theme of Love, Kural paints a picture of the beloved who

is separated from her lover. She is thinking of him quite often, though unable to meet him. Hence she speaks of her pining to her heart thus: "Take these eyes and meet him. O heart! Or their hunger will eat me out (1244)". The words are simple, straight, and the feelings are very telling in the couplet. It is almost impossible to capture the spirit in English translation. One may object: It is dealing with love and not morality. In a work of morality Kural deals with the ideals of love. That is its speciality too. Coming to a verse on morality: "Even falsehood may for truth suffice, When good it brings removing vice (292)". To be more explicit, it may sound as though one may utter lies, if good comes out of it. But actually, nobody can speak a good falsehood according to Kural. For it demands that the resultant good should be blameless. How can a good be blameless if it is born of a lie? So under no circumstance may one utter a lie. Such is the apparent contradiction of Kural!

A Christian Look

We have already mentioned how some Christians claim that Thiru Valluvar was a Christian. We shall not enter into that controversy here. We confine ourselves to state that quite a lot of Christian ideas are found in Thiru Kural. It will suffice to state that the most important or central ideal of Christian life is portrayed in Thiru Kural. It is dealing with love of the neighbour especially in the area of forgiveness. Three Kurals claim special mention. The first: "Doing good-turns, put them to shame, Thus chide the evil who do harm" (314). It may be paraphrased as 'To punish the wicked and to put to shame, one should do good to them' - this is the vengeance one may practise, says Thiru Kural. Here, two words claim special attention: they are *to punish*, and *to shame*. But it is done by doing good to the evil doers (314)! The Sermon on the Mountain has the sayings of Our Lord as "you have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same." (Mt 5: 43-46). This thought occurs in the chapter on non-violence.

The second is : "Of perfection what is the gain if it returns not joy for pain? (987) A more accurate translation would be: If one wants to be a cultured person, he should do good even to those who do evil. Jesus Christ explicitly states: "And if you salute only your brethren what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Mt 5:47).

The third may be paraphrased as follows: even if death is brought about, they won't give up love, whose bond is cemented by love (807). Jesus Christ, Our Lord, enacted and proved this on calvary. This Kural may be described as the character-sketch of Jesus Christ Himself.

Christian Idea of Marriage

Jesus tells the pharisees who questioned Him on divorce: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two shall become one? So they are no longer two but one" (Mt 19: 4-5). The implication is that marriage is based on mutual love alone, promotes love and is fruitful in love and nothing else. Thiru Kural says that the nature and fruit of marriage are love and righteousness (45).

Christian Aspect of Religious Life

The aim of religious life is to attain perfection. It is called the state of perfection. While the married person attains a virtue in an ordinary degree, the religious is to excel. Thiru Kural gives ideals to the ascetic in veracity, non-violence, penance etc.

Thus in general principles, in its attitude to married life, to religious life and even in the idea of God, Thiru Kural reflects Christian thought perfectly. Constantine Beschi, the great Italian Jesuit Poet, quotes copiously from Thiru Kural in his great epic '*Thembavani*' which he composed in Tamil. He has translated two parts of Kural into Latin; all because Thiru Valluvar is so much Christian in his thought.

Discussion Forum

Discussion Forum was opened as far back as 1972. It was stated in my Introduction to *Jeevadhara*, Vol. No. 1 : "For the force of its statements, opinions and propositions *Jeevadhara* will rely on the reasons and arguments put forward in the articles and the evidence adduced in support of them. Still there will be difference of opinion. Readers are welcome to voice their views on those expressed in our articles provided they have solid arguments." This request is made not merely to our readers but especially to our contributors and Editors and to all our theologians. Only this kind of arguments and counter-arguments and discussion will further theological thinking and inculturation. Dr. Chethimattam is heartily congratulated on his reviving this important column.

General Editor

Assumptions of Dialogue with Other Religions

Several Indian theologians writing in the May 2000 issue of *Jeevadhara* (Vol XXX, No. 177) presenting a theological response to *Ecclesia in Asia* do indeed question the traditional faith of Christians and the very historical identity of Christianity on several points. These raise issues regarding both the method of approach and the substance of our faith.

Sebastian Painadath, editor of the issue, states the basic problem: The Roman Synodal document "demands: 'Christians bring to interreligious dialogue the firm belief that the fullness of salvation comes from Christ alone and that the church community to which they belong is the ordinary means of salvation.' With the attitude contained in this demand, we Christians cannot genuinely respect the Scriptures and symbols of other religions and promote a culture of dialogue in Asia." For, "the goal of interreligious dialogue is to listen to God's Word vibrating in and through other religions" (p.258). Jacob Kavunkal readily admits, "According to the New Testament a Christian can and must believe that Jesus Christ is the only Mediator, in so far as all are participants in that Mystery identified as Jesus Christ" (p.295). But at the same time he affirms: "This insistence on the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the unique Redeemer and the desire to make the fruits of the Paschal Mystery available to all in the Church, makes mission a laughing stock in a pluri-religious context". In support of this he quotes Narendra Mohan M.P. editor of many B.J.P. publications that implementing John Paul II's call to evangelization will invite division and conflict in the world at large..

Michael Amaldoss S.J. argues that Jesus as the symbol of God does not exhaust God-experience, that only as the Word or Son he is the fullness of revelation and salvation, and that "when the Mystery of Salvation is reduced to the Paschal Mystery" the whole historical-eschatological dimension is lost sight of "(pp.284-86). According to him Jesus was a historical person who lived long ago, and showed in his life, work and death a particular way of carrying his struggle by opting for the poor and the oppressed. His disciples continued his work. We can proclaim only his work and example without the dogmatic conclusion 'Jesus is the unique Saviour'.

Raimundo Panikkar argues that it is debatable whether Jesus ever claimed to be the Jewish Messiah, that the Christian confession of Jesus is only a belief and not an historical fact, and that the Christ preached within the universe of discourse of Greek and Latin world view is not an Asian Jesus (pp. 330-334).

First of all what is being questioned here is the very scope and nature of interreligious dialogue. Dialogue by its very nature is an active presence to each other in faith of the participants, and does not demand a compromise of one's faith. Since it assumes the honesty and integrity of all there is no need to suspend or bracket one's own faith. Only one who is firmly rooted in his own faith can enter into fruitful dialogue with other faiths. One who is afraid of being made a laughing stock by others for his faith should not go for dialogue. St. Paul did not hesitate to go to the Areopagus and preach about Christ risen from the dead, even though people laughed at him and walked out on him.

Secondly Jesus' question to his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" cannot be arbitrarily answered anew by each generation of the disciples according to their convenience. It was once and for all answered by Peter: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" which Christ himself approved as coming from a direct revelation from the Father. Only the purely Western analytical method would prompt one to give a new answer to the question according to our needs today. There is no Christianity without accepting the testimony of the Apostles regarding the person and work of Jesus, which they grasped in a new way after the Resurrection. The mystery of the Incarnation is not any change or modification in the divinity which is one for the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, nor in the divine person of the Logos. It implies change only at the creature's end, namely in the conscious and free human nature of Jesus, who grew in knowledge and wisdom and reached the full consciousness that he has his self-identity in the person of the Son, and that only through the one Son could any human being attain divine sonship. The paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus was the one decisive event in human history by which the Son of God became the Lord of history to lead the whole creation to its

final end. This claim is not anything stranger than a Rishi's realization: "*Aham brahmasmi*- My Self is Brahman", which is the core-experience of Hinduism! Similar is the Buddha's illumination regarding the Four Noble Truths, without which there is no religion of Buddhism. These religious facts are foundational to faith and cannot be reduced to empirical sociology or history.

Reducing Jesus to a historical individual who lived two thousand years ago and his social message, without referring to his messianic stature, his social message itself would lose its religious motivation. Without relation to the one Father in heaven there is no reason to love the weak, poor, voiceless and down-trodden on earth, especially when they are in the way of our self-interest: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven" (Matt.5:44-45). Without the command of the Master who indicated mutual love and humble service as the sign of his disciples there is no reason to sacrifice one's life for the sake of others. "I tell you whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me." (Matt. 25:40)

That Jesus by his resurrection was freed of his time-place limitations and became a life-giving spirit (1 Cor 15:45), that through his resurrection he is constituted the Son of God (Rom 1:4), and that he is present in every heart is the basic constitutive claim of Christianity. These differing claims of religions are not contradictory. Accepting the claims of Jesus does not demand that one should reject the Scriptures of other religions or their specific modes of religious experience. Just as Jesus is not the monopoly of Christians but belongs to all humans as their common heritage so also other religious leaders like Mohammed and Buddha and their teachings belong to Christians as well. Though all religions have an equal dignity as expressing people's understanding of their ultimate concerns, they are not all saying the same thing, nor are they all equally salvific. So we do not expect our faith to be judged by the faith of another, though we may have a lot to learn from him regarding aspects of our own faith which we may have neglected or taken for granted. They are different like apples and oranges and approach the faith, God's gift to all his children, from different angles. The scope of interreligious dialogue is to bring people of different religious traditions to see their common heritage and discuss how they can appropriate and be faithful to the contributions of different religions. If one has to water down one's faith to accommodate it to the likes and dislikes of others, dialogue itself would be a betrayal of the faith one holds in trust for all one's fellow human beings. That is why St. Paul said: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel."

John B. Chethimattam

Book Review

Arun Shourie, *Harvesting our Souls, Missionaries, Their Designs, Their Claims*, New Delhi: ASA Publications, 2000

Arun Shourie, a member of the Rajya Sabha and a minister in the Central Govt. of India is a graduate of St. Stephen's College, Delhi, who went on to take a doctorate in economics from the Syracuse University, USA. He had a distinguished career as Editor of *Indian Express* and received many awards for his courageous reporting. The present book is written with the sole purpose of proving that Christianity is a religion full of contradictions, that Christian missionaries would not dare and cannot convert intelligent people like him "who can think by themselves", that they 'harvest' the souls of illiterate people through money and other allurements. The main assumption is that conversion of even an individual causes grave disruption of his family and society. So he wants to show that the chain of recent atrocities against Christians is justified as a result of tensions following conversions and that the public outcry against those atrocities is a conspiracy of missionaries calculated to gain the sympathy of foreign donors in order to get more money to harvest more souls.

The main bulk of the book is an outsider's journalistic description of the apparent contradictions in the different books of the Bible and different themes in Christian theology like the idea of God and the nature of the Church. One can easily see that Shourie is corrupted by his Western education. He follows some Western scholars who analyze the Bible to its minimal units, show the various forms and legends and cultural pressures that are behind their statements, and fail to see the wood for the trees. This Humpty-Dumpty method of exegesis is a convenient tool to give a garbled and scurrilous presentation of the Sacred Book of a religion that has inspired billions down the centuries and still continues to inspire them. He does not make any distinction between what is basic and what is marginal in Christian faith, and what is agreed upon by all Christians and what is freely debated, what were the old missionary distortions in the age of colonialism condemned by Christians themselves and what is the understanding among religions in this age of inter-faith dialogue. No effort is made to understand how an honest and faithful follower of Christianity keeps his faith in the midst of such paradoxes. It would appear that he does not suppose that there are any sincere Christian believers.

Besides, it is assumed that the whole Christian religion is a huge programme of advertising. He boldly asserts: "We can now see what the basic, foundational deception has been in all missionary effort; they have kept their target population entirely in the dark about the results of three

hundred years of discourse on the Bible and related matters in Europe and America. Every one is so firm about requiring 'truth in advertising' in regard to cigarettes. Shouldn't we require some of it in missionary activity too?" (pp. 218-19). This method of studying another religion is so outrageously simplistic that in this fashion any journalist with minimum talents can, make easy work of any faith, of Hinduism or Islam or Buddhism. All these religions have plenty of religious texts which can never be fully reconciled. Besides every major religious tradition has today hundreds of new religious movements and sects which question one or other of the traditional beliefs. To assume that they all are a single consistent system and blame the religion of deception is a mockery of present day scholarship in the study of religions.

What is equally surprising is Shourie's effort to describe the great many attacks against Christians and the excuses to show that they are not any organized programmes of Hindus. Surely they are not. They are the work of a few miscreants who are encouraged by the atmosphere of hatred created by a few individuals and organisations. That the author is able to report these gruesome events one after another and especially the atrocious burning alive of Graham Staines and his two young sons without a single word of regret only proves what a sick mind his is. The many quotations from the report of Justice Wadhwa abundantly prove how justified was the public impression that his report on the murders of Graham Staines and his young sons was a "whitewash", "a stained report", and a "politically tutored" one. He was not worried that the murderers of Staines were not caught and their political connections explored in depth, but only that, 51 people were arrested as suspects by the police. He finds ample reason for the murder of the missionary who spent the better part of his life caring for lepers, in the report that he conducted Bible Classes and attended Jungle Camps and prayed for the conversion of people. One of the important incriminating evidence against Staines is that he writes: "Jungle camp means four days of Bible teaching, prayer and fellowship of Christians living together. It enables believers from other churches to meet with local Christians to discuss experiences and encourage one another" (p.17). If anything is proved from the long quotations from the dispatches of Graham and Gladys Staines to the journal *Tidings* in Australia is that there was no kind of force or persuasion for gaining conversion but only the service of the mind through preaching of the Word of God along with the service of the body through medical healing (pp. 16-21).

Even in the Christian fight for the political rights of the Dalits, Shourie finds an ulterior motive: "We must, therefore, be vigilant to this new impulse. It is not compassion for the downtrodden which has led the Church to suddenly espouse the cause of 'Christian Dalits'. It is the fear that unless they are seen to be doing so, the converts would begin deserting them. And the calculation that once they can assure the potential convert that he would not lose any of the benefits that State policies now confer on him, they would have another argument that would help wean him away from Hinduism"

(p. 411). Of course, any conversion creates a certain amount of tension. When a girl marries a boy whom the family does not like because he is from a lower social class there is tension. When one leaves a political party and joins another there is tension. But the real motive behind the tension in places like Orissa and Gujarat regarding the conversion of Dalits is not any concern for religion but merely economic and political. As many impartial observers reported, through the social liberation of Dalits, the upper castes lost the service of thousands of virtual slaves who clean their dry latrines with their bare hands and carry the night soil on their heads. Those who traditionally blindly obeyed their masters at the polling booths are slowly waking up to their power in a democracy. Anybody can see that this is the real source of tension. "Where will we get people to till the soil and perform the menial services?" is the question openly asked by the vested interests in these parts of the country. The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act stipulates among other things: "No person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religious faith to another by use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means, nor shall any person abet such conversion". At the murder of Rev. Arul Doss, who spent his life for the social and economic liberation of the tribals, Justice Wadhwa was too quick to state that Dara Singh was a hero for the people and reproduce the statement of the Home Secretary of Orissa that tension had risen in the area as Catholic priests were "trying to split families after converting tribals". But actually people were outraged at such easy reports and clamored that the Home Department should be taken away from the officer. For Shourie, however, those officers who reported the political activity of Dara Singh and his mentors are just weaklings: "Those officers of Orissa typify not just the State, but also society - a people who have been totally confused by fifty years of perverted propaganda: the combined result of the near-stranglehold over the media of secularists on the one hand, and of the slavishness of the Indian intellectual class on the other" (p.415).

So the attempt of the book is to discredit Christians by a "scholarly (?)" analysis of their Scriptures and a "theological (?)" examination of the basis of their missionary activity. "The basic lesson of this survey is", he says, "to clear the national mind, develop a strong and purposeful State.... Just read the publications of the missionaries. In particular read the Bible. Read what is common knowledge about it in Europe. Make that known all across the country. At each opportunity question the missionaries about what is contained in the Bible,. And about what scholars in advanced Christian countries have written about it (p. 418).

A very tall order, indeed! and mark the world of ignorance revealed. Just who does he think the more than a billion strong Christians of the world are? All a pack of idiots or crooks? The book stands condemned by its own pretensions!

John B Chethimattam